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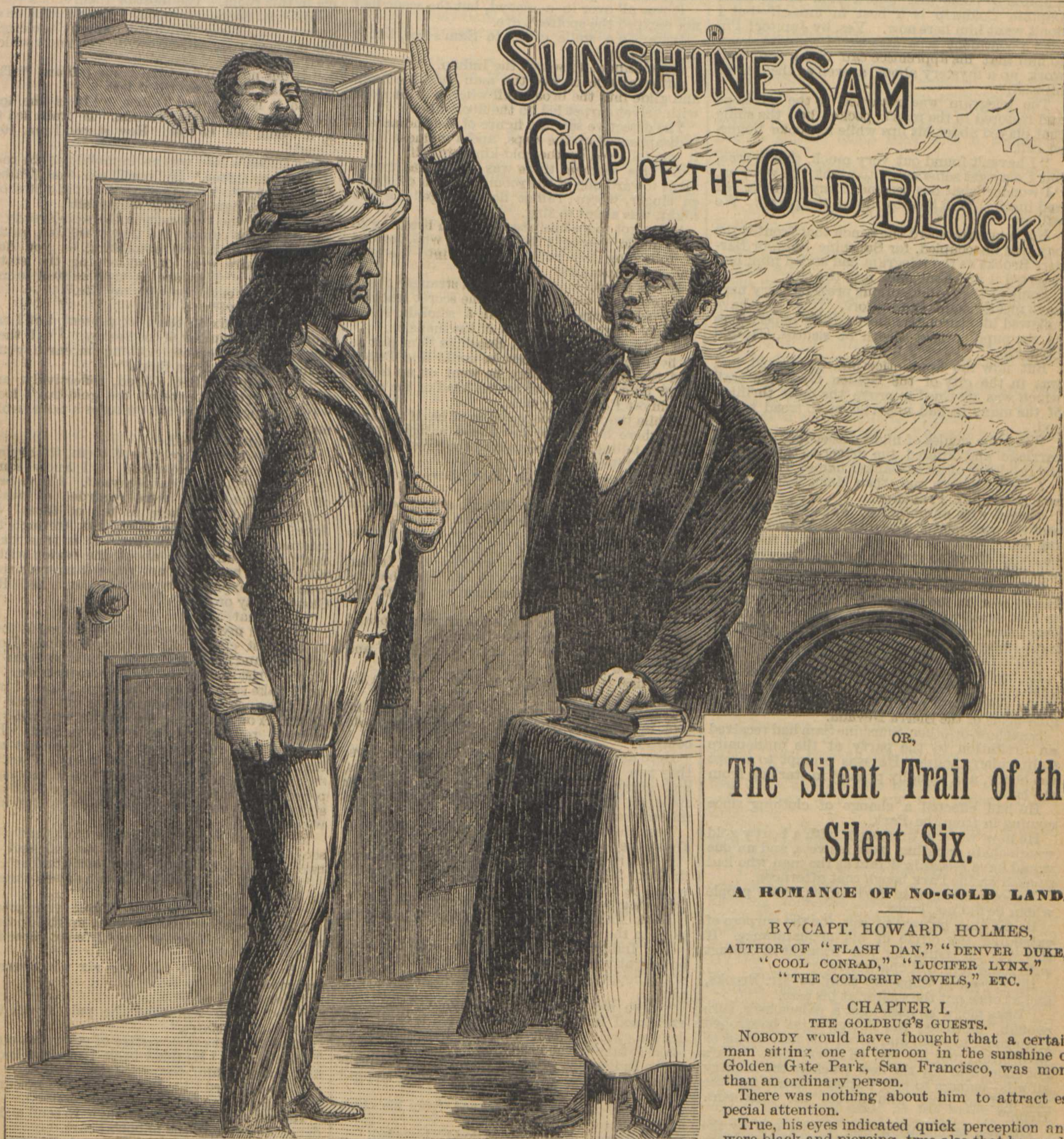
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OR,

The Silent Trail of the Silent Six.

A ROMANCE OF NO-GOLD LAND.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"
"COOL CONRAD," "LUCIFER LYNX,"
"THE COLDGRIP NOVELS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GOLDBUG'S GUESTS.

NOBODY would have thought that a certain man sitting one afternoon in the sunshine of Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, was more than an ordinary person.

There was nothing about him to attract especial attention.

True, his eyes indicated quick perception and were black and piercing, true also that he would have looked quite a different character in different clothes; but as he was, plainly dressed and

"ON THE BOOK I SWEAR IT, RED CLOUD. I GIVE YOU MEDORA FOR THE SECRET
OF THE LOST CAMP."

enjoying a cigar in the sunshine, he was not the person to demand attention.

He occupied a bench from which he had a magnificent view of the bay and the ocean beyond.

With one leg crossed upon the other, he leaned back and seemed to study the sea between the puffs of white smoke which he sent upward to mingle with the fleecy clouds that floated lazily across the sky.

The afternoon was almost too hot for comfort; a broiling sun beat upon sea and sand, making both glitter like a burnished shield.

Thousands of pleasure-seekers kept in the shade of the Park, but the lounge in the sun appeared to enjoy his *siesta* with the zest of a veritable sun lizard.

When his right hand moved at last, it was to take a telegraph envelope from an inner pocket.

His fingers next proceeded to deprive the envelope of a telegram which he smoothed out on his lap, and then he read as follows:

"NEW YORK, July 11th, 188—. To BARNETT BROOKS, San Francisco:—
"I cannot join you. An unexpected case here. You must go ahead and fight it out alone. Remember the last words of the immortal Crockett—
"Be sure you're right, then go ahead!"

"CLAUDE."

The man in the Park smiled over the last sentence.

"This is just what I wanted!" he declared, mentally. "I was afraid the captain would take a notion to come and take a hand in the case. Captain Coldgrip is a host in himself—but I don't want him here now. Yes, by Jupiter! I'm glad a continent separates us. I want to prove to him that his apprentice can find a trail and work up a mystery about as well as the master himself."

The telegram was returned to the envelope and restored to the man's pocket, but the smile that played about his lips while he spoke lingered still.

"I haven't found out very much, that is true, but I may get some news to-night," he went on. "I wonder what has become of my friend in red and black. Will he show up at the party? We will see."

Not long afterward the bench that fronted the bay was unoccupied, for Sunshine Sam, or Barnett Brooks as the telegram had styled him, had deserted it and gone back into the city.

Some of the readers of our present story may have met Sunshine Sam before. If so, they have followed him through some exciting experiences as the pupil of that sleuth of sleuths, Captain Coldgrip.

But now the apprentice had graduated, and was in the city of the Golden Gate on a trail which was destined to prove the most thrilling of the many he had undertaken to tread to the end.

When the shades of night descended, he took a carriage and ordered the driver to take him to the residence of an ex-banker named Talbot.

A better known man than Mark Talbot there was not in San Francisco.

Blessed with an unlimited amount of wealth, and the possessor of a beautiful wife and a dashing ward, whose beauty was the talk of the town, he could afford to give the parties for which he was famous.

It is said that representatives of all nations, can be seen on the streets of 'Frisco; this seemed to hold equally good with the Talbot receptions. One found there the rich and intelligent of almost every clime.

Mark Talbot had been everywhere.

He had begun at the bottom of the ladder and gone up. In his best room hung a dingy-looking miner's pick with which he had toiled among the gold-fields of the Sierra Nevada.

Somehow-or-other, Sunshine Sam had received an invitation to the party at the millionaire Californian's house. He was prompt to accept the honor, and equally prompt in starting from the hotel.

He had effected a change of clothing since coming in from the Park.

He now wore a dress-suit, with a heavy gold watch-chain dangling from his vest, and no one would have recognized him as the man who had smoked on the Park bench that afternoon.

Talbot sometimes invited to his house people whom he did not know.

He did this, he used to say, for the purpose of extending the circle of his acquaintance. If this was the truth, he was brought in contact with some very odd characters.

He welcomed Sunshine Sam as Mr. Brooks, and at once put the visitor at his ease.

"Bless me, if he hasn't got a palace here, sure enough," admitted the detective, as he strolled from room to room and noted the indications of wealth that met his eye on every side. "He's got enough to buy the best trackers the country affords—enough to pull Captain Claude into the net and to drag him across the continent. Hello!"

The last exclamation was drawn out by the man who had just entered the room where Sam stood.

He was tall, and as straight as an arrow. A pair of intensely black eyes looked out over high

cheek-bones of a dark coppery hue; his hair was black and straight, falling to his shoulders in uncombed masses, and his head was surmounted by a soft broad-brimmed hat, with a snake-skin for a band.

It was easily seen that this individual was not at home in the clothes he wore. He was better fitted to go about naked to the waist, and with buckskin leggings instead of broadcloth around his nether limbs.

The Indian was made for the plain, not for the parlor.

Sunshine Sam watched the dark-skinned guest narrowly from the first.

He happened to be in a position from whence he could do this without courting notice. He seemed to see no one in particular, although, in reality, his restless eagle-like eyes saw everybody in the handsome rooms.

Mark Talbot's party that night was a mixed affair. It kept the gold-bug busy greeting his different guests; but, as Sam had not seen him meet the red-skin, he was inclined to believe that that individual had slipped in without the usual welcome.

All at once the detective caught sight of Mark Talbot advancing toward the Indian.

"Now I shall see," muttered Sam.

The bonanza king passed on until he stood face to face with the red-skin, whom he found in his path. The detective was on the alert.

Talbot held out his hand to the Indian and spoke a few words of greeting in a common tone, but, just as he moved on, he leaned forward and whispered at the red-skin's ear.

It was all over in a second, but the scene had not escaped the spotter's eye.

Instantly a smile came to Sam's lips, but it did not tarry long.

He continued to watch the Indian.

After awhile he saw the man quit the room and glide into the broad hall where a wide stair with velvet carpet led to the floors above.

The detective saw the figure of the Indian ere it disappeared up the steps, and a moment later it was followed by the gold-king himself.

At this moment there was a general movement toward one of the rooms where a celebrated singer, whom Talbot had engaged for the night, was about to sing.

"I've got more business here than listening to paid music," thought the detective who, instead of following the crowd, stepped into the hall, and went up-stairs!

It was a bold movement for a stranger guest, but propriety was no bar to the secret tracker.

He soon found himself in a semi-darkened corridor on the second floor of the mansion.

"It isn't here," decided Sunshine Sam just as if he knew exactly where he could find Talbot and the Indian, and then he went on up to the third floor, and halted at the head of the steps in almost Egyptian gloom.

While there were no gas-jets at hand to show him where he was, he saw ahead a light above a door, telling that one part of the house at least was inhabited.

Sam leaned toward a door above which he had seen the light.

One can see nothing through a door, and, to Sam's dismay, there was a key in the lock.

But the detective had not come to the spot to be baffled by obstacles of this sort.

He knew that he had tracked the Indian down. It needed no voice to tell him that the savage in cloth was at that moment beyond the door with the 'Frisco nabob.

Suddenly the hands of the sleuth went up, and grasped the top of the door-frame.

The next moment he drew himself up and looked into the room beyond.

The first thing he saw was a large map on the wall directly ahead.

It covered nearly one side of the room, and took in a large part of the Sierra Nevada gold country.

Here and there were lines of different colors; they ran hither and thither like serpent trails, and every now and then they touched dark spots on the map, which Sam imagined to be mining-camps.

Near the center of the map there was a circle about one foot across.

It was in the heart of the mountain range, and the light falling full upon it showed Sam that it would be hard to reach.

Having seen the map, he looked at the men.

Mark Talbot occupied an elegant chair at a table in the middle of the room.

The Indian was between him and the map, but slightly to one side, and the coal-black eyes of the coppery guest were fixed on the millionaire.

"Give me your opinion anyhow," suddenly exclaimed Talbot. "Here—take this chalk and draw a circle to suit yourself; but, mind you, make it take in the lost camp."

The Indian bent forward and took the proffered chalk from Talbot's hand, then stepped proudly toward the map.

The gold-bug of 'Frisco leaned from his chair and watched his dusky guest.

"Make no mistake, Red Cloud," he cried.

For a moment the Indian studied the map with his piercing eyes.

Talbot held his breath.

All at once a quick step bore the red-skin almost to the wall, and the next second there was a circular sweep of the scarlet hand.

Mark Talbot sprung up with a cry as the Indian wheeled with flashing eyes.

There was a circle of blue within the first circle on the map, but it was no larger than a saucer's rim.

"A thousand thanks, Red Cloud!" cried Talbot. "You are the man I've been looking for these ten years."

CHAPTER II.

AN OATH-BOUND COMPACT.

The Indian did not reply.

"Do you tell me it is within this circle?" continued Talbot, going up to the map and placing his finger on the territory around which Red Cloud had drawn his mark.

"Did not my pencil talk?" was the answer.

"Certainly it did. You will pardon my eagerness. I can hardly realize that I have found it at last."

"Found what, white man?"

"The—the lost camp."

The semblance of a smile appeared at the corners of the red-skin's mouth, but it went no further.

The 'Frisco money-king turned from his guest, and looked eagerly at the spot he had touched.

"Another said it was somewhere in the larger circle," he resumed. "That was a year ago, Red Cloud; but he could not say positively. Since then I have questioned hundreds of people in this room. The most of them shook their heads—and there were some who should have known something—but until to-night the circle has not been reduced. Now, do you know which trail leads to it?"

"It has no trail," returned the Indian. "The white man forgets that it is lost."

"So it is!" laughed Talbot. "It is the lost gold-city of the Sierra Nevada. If trails led to it, it would not be lost. How stupid I am, Red Cloud!"

The Indian's face was as immobile as the face of a bronze statue. He could see that Talbot was burning to learn more, yet he did not show the slightest sign of enlightening him.

"I've got the best men in the world ready to set out for the camp. All they want is a guide, one who really knows something, as you do," the millionaire went on, addressing the statuesque chief. "They are as true as steel to me. I would trust each one with my life."

"How many?"

"There are six of them at present, but I can increase the number if necessary. I call them the Silent Six, because nothing on earth could wring the secret from them."

"Six?" replied Red Cloud, reflectively, and then his eye encountered the gold-bug's look. "It is enough to give the vultures a taste, white man."

Mark Talbot started.

"The birds won't get one of them, if they are properly led!" he exclaimed. "I know something about the mountains myself. I have been on expeditions that were regarded as death-journeys, and I am here to tell of them. By Jove! I would send the Silent Six through the infernal regions without fear. It is true that I don't know anything about the region within your circle, but it is not more dangerous than some I've explored myself—it can't be! Red Cloud, I rely on you."

"For what?"

"To lead my men to the secret—to guide them to the lost city of the gold mountains. Don't say no," and Talbot's fingers encircled the Indian's wrist before he could remonstrate. "I can't take such a word from your lips. I will call my men up. They are in my house to-night. You shall see the spirits who will not hesitate to follow wherever you lead. Red Cloud, I can furnish you with the coolest men that ever trod at an Indian's heels. They are sworn to me, and inaction in 'Frisco has sharpened their appetites till they are ready to spring with a cheer to the trail, though it bristles with death."

Red Cloud heard Talbot through, and then sent a look toward the map on the wall and the two circles drawn by his hand and another's.

"What is Red Cloud to receive, white man?" he asked, haughtily.

"What do you demand? Name your price."

A strange fire seemed to light up the Indian's orbs, but it vanished as quickly as it came into being.

"Red Cloud will lead the six white men on one condition."

"Name it, I say."

"Red Cloud will take the pale flower that blooms down-stairs."

In an instant every vestige of color was out of Talbot's face. He drew back from the Indian and gazed at him, thunderstruck.

Although Red Cloud had mentioned no names, his language could not be misunderstood.

He had spoken plainly enough to send a shudder of aversion to the nabob's heart.

"Did the white man understand Red Cloud?" asked the savage, with an eagerness tinged with sarcasm.

"Yes, but *she* is dear to me. You forget, Red Cloud, that she is all the child I have," was the response.

"She is not the white man's child."

"Not of my blood and bone—that is true. But Medora is as dear to me—"

Talbot caught the Indian's look at that moment, and stopped.

"I talk to stone, and yet I've got to have the secret," flashed through his mind. "This heartless red is not so strong that his locks cannot be clipped by and by. I forget that I am master of the Silent Six."

Then he spoke to Red Cloud again.

"Will nothing else satisfy you?" he asked.

"I am willing to open my treasury to you."

A light laugh, full of derision, sparkled the red-skin's eyes.

"What need has he of gold who knows the way to the lost camp?" he exclaimed, and then his tone dropped into marble-like seriousness as he went on:

"Red Cloud has named his price, and he takes no other. He holds the key to the lost city of the mines, and he puts it into the white man's hand for the flower he calls Medora. Let the pale chief speak. The ears of Red Cloud are open and he listens. Shall he lead the six to the lost mines?"

"By heavens' you shall!" cried Talbot.

"Then," responded the Indian with emphasis, "then, the mountains of snow shall give up their secret!"

An exclamation of triumph was the reply.

"Now let the white man tie his words with an oath on the book his people worship," continued Red Cloud. "He will do this?"

"I will; and you, in return, must swear to keep your part of the compact."

"Red Cloud will swear."

Talbot walked across the room and took a book from a shelf.

Placing it on the table when he came back, he laid his hand solemnly upon it and looked up into the Indian's face.

"Swear!" said Red Cloud, touching the nabob's arm, "swear, white man, by the God your people worship and on the book He gave them, that Medora shall be the Indian's bride."

"It shall be so!" and Talbot threw one hand aloft. "On the book I swear it, Red Cloud. I give you Medora for the secret of the lost camp."

Again the Indian's eyes grew bright with victory, and as the Frisco nabob stepped back, he drew his figure proudly up, and lifted his right hand toward heaven.

"Red Cloud knows only the Great Spirit of his race. White men say he is the same as their God. In his presence the red child of the gold land swears to lead the Silent Six to the secret of the snowy Sierra! Let the pale-face remember his oath when Red Cloud has fulfilled his!"

As the red right hand of the savage dropped at his side, Sunshine Sam descended to the floor in the hall beyond the door.

He had witnessed one of the most exciting scenes he had ever encountered during his detective experience.

During the interview he had held himself up to the transom by the powerful grip of his hands, and the tension had been so great that when he stood again on the floor, every muscle felt sore.

He knew that the mutual oaths had finished the remarkable compact between Talbot and the Indian, and the following minute he was on his way to the well-filled parlors below.

Nothing occurred to interrupt the detective's return to the place from which he had first caught sight of the Indian.

"The trail has begun," he ejaculated. "I must not lose sight of that red captain of the Silent Six. The next few days will determine whether the lost gold city of the Sierra is a myth. I have crossed a continent on a strange quest, and I discover that I am to have pitted against me an Indian whose very looks proclaim that he is no mean antagonist. And then there are the Silent Six! Where are they? Under this very roof, Talbot said. I wonder if I can pick them out?"

Sunshine Sam strolled from room to room, mingling with the people they contained. He had but one object in view, and that was to find the six men whom Mark Talbot had called "the six coolest heads in the universe."

This task was not an easy one, but here and there he selected a man until he had the number filled.

"I am liable to be mistaken, but time will show," thought the independent sleuth. "If I have chosen the right parties, I must admit that Mark Talbot selected the very men for the work. This is the kind of a case that would have delighted Captain Claude; still, I am glad he has telegraphed that he cannot take a hand in the game."

Soon after his descent of the stairs, Sam saw the striking figure of the Indian among the nabob's guests. There was nothing on the dark face to betray to any one the important interview that had just been had, and the sleuth amused himself with a study of Red Cloud as he moved slowly from place to place.

"Ha! he has found what he was looking for!" suddenly exclaimed Sam, on seeing the red-skin stop and fasten his eyes on a young girl who at that moment had left a chair and swept toward the piano.

It was Medora.

Impelled by curiosity which he could not conquer Sam moved forward and looked at the girl.

She was beautiful of face and graceful in figure, and there was that about her which thrilled the sleuth when he thought of the disgraceful bargain he had just heard.

"If they carry it out, may I never report to Captain Claude!" cried Sam, and then, finding his blood growing hot, he turned away and walked from the house.

The city shadow passed into the elegant gardens that surrounded the house of the Frisco magnate.

Overhead a full moon rode grandly through the heavens, and here and there patches of silver light revealed the beauties of the scene.

For some time Sunshine Sam walked among the trees.

The wind that fanned his cheeks was laden with the saltiness of the waves that tossed restlessly not far away.

The gardens, dotted with strollers when he first came out, had become deserted, and the detective began to think that in justice to his host he ought to go back.

He decided to do so, at last, when, all at once, a figure crossed a patch of moonshine a few feet distant.

Instinctively Sam drew back, and put a clump of luxuriant acacias between him and the object.

Then, with a start, he saw halt within ten feet of him Red Cloud, the Indian.

"What is he up to now?" thought Sam.

Red Cloud did not keep him waiting long.

Suddenly he took off his hat with the snake-skin band, and threw it upon the center of a plat of moonlight.

Then he drew from beneath his coat a long and slender knife with a polished handle.

Drawing his figure up as he fell back a step, the Indian caught the bowie at the point and sent it spinning toward the sky.

Sunshine Sam watched it until, above the tops of the tallest shrubs, it turned and came down like an arrow.

The next instant it quivered in the ground through the top of the Indian's hat!

Three times was this feat repeated with the same precision.

Then Red Cloud put the knife up, donned his hat, and walked off with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"I see," murmured Sam, as he watched him. "The devil to fight! But I'm in for it, and if I fail, may the Sierras hide my failure!"

"Yet that night a message crossed the continent. It merely said:

"I have struck the trail!"

"SAM."

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER MISSION.

"BACK at last! In fortune's name what kept you? I have been dying by inches for the last hour, and every footstep I heard I took to be yours. Now, sit down and tell me. You must have news."

"What makes you think so?"

"I have felt all along that to-night was to be the turning point."

"I think it is."

"Thank God!"

These words passed between two men in a little room some distance from Mark Talbot's palace, but still in San Francisco, and the time was the same night and shortly after the nabob's last guest, an Indian, had departed.

There were no appearances of wealth about the room; no rich carpets and silk curtains. On the contrary, there were signs of poverty, and one of the men occupied a cot with his haggard face propped up with pillows.

This man was past fifty. His eyes gleamed brightly behind a sallow skin, and his hair was long and uncared for.

His companion was much younger.

He was a perfect specimen of young manhood as one sees it in the farther West—athletic, handsome, agile.

The contrast between the two was striking, one young and in splendid health, the other well advanced in years, and apparently in the grasp of the destroyer.

For some moments after his fervent ejaculation "Thank God," the man on the cot looked at his companion in silence.

The young man sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I was at Mark Talbot's party," said he.

"At that man's house, Claude?" and the speaker's hands clutched the bedclothes madly.

"May he and his millions be forever accursed!"

"I echo the sentiment of course, Nathan," was the answer, accompanied by a smile. "But you know we have to become the guests of people we do not like."

"Sometimes. Yes, yes!"

"It was thus to-night."

"At Mark Talbot's?"

"He had a houseful as usual, Nathan."

"A mixed crowd!" smiled the man in bed.

"Considerably mixed. Well, I got a little news."

"I hope it is good. Did Talbot question any of his guests about the lost mines of the Sierra?"

"He did."

"Who were they, this time?"

"The one who helped him most was an Indian."

"I always told you so!" and Nathan leaned forward and clutched the young man's wrist. "Great heavens! haven't I nearly worn out my life looking for the lost trail, the secret of which I have maintained must be an Indian's if any living creature possesses it?"

"You have said so, Nathan."

"And it was an Indian who gave Talbot some information to-night?"

"Yes."

"How did he help him? Go on, Claude."

The young man was amused by the old one's eagerness.

"The red-skin made a *smaller* circle on the nabob's map," he answered.

"He drew one within the circle that has been there a long time, did he?"

"He did."

"And how large was it?"

"Your hand could have spanned it."

"So? The little circle must have made Talbot's eyes snap."

"I did not see the Indian make it, and I cannot say."

"Then, how did you get to see the circle?"

"I went up-stairs after Talbot and the Indian had come down. The door of the private room was unlocked. Of course I entered. I thought of the time when the Frisco millionaire stood me up before his map and quizzed me about my travels in the Sierras. It was three months ago, but the episode came back with a wonderful distinctness."

"The man is gold-mad, curse him! You entered the room, you say?"

"Yes."

"And saw the inner circle made by the Indian?"

"I saw it."

"And of course took a diagram of the country it takes in?"

The young man thrust one hand into an inside pocket and drew out a bit of paper which his companion caught eagerly at with an exclamation of joy.

"Is this it? Bring the light here, Claude. You've done splendidly. By Jove! you make me young again!"

The youth took a light from the table and held it close to the paper which the man on the cot had opened with trembling fingers.

"I had to draw it hastily," he said, apologizing for the rough draught. "I did not know when Talbot or the Indian would come back. I don't think you can understand it without some explanation."

"I see one thing!" cried Nathan, suddenly brightening. "The red-skin's circle takes in what we used to call 'No-Gold Land.' This river is tortuous enough to be Skeleton River. Claude, I'm afraid the Indian hoodwinked the California nabob."

"I cannot say. Red Cloud looked almighty sober when he came down-stairs."

"Red Cloud was it?" cried Nathan.

"Red Cloud, the Klamath."

The old man passed his hand reflectively across his forehead.

"There are so many of them," he said. "These Indians are tricksters, Claude. They have led me to more than one wild-goose chase; their lies have robbed me of more than one year of life. What do you think about Red Cloud's story? You have an opinion, boy."

"I have, Nathan," was the answer, spoken in firm tones, and the two men looked steadily at one another. "I believe the Indian knows something."

"That is the way to say it, Claude. Are you ready to test him?"

"I am!"

"I knew you would not fail me when the time came. I can't go out of the world without knowing where the lost camp is. I don't care a fig for the gold it contains. Solve the mystery that hangs over the fate of my child, and you can take all it yields you. My child! my child! My God! Claude, all my life is wrapped up in her. Fool I was, to drag her upon such an expedition, but what else could I do? We were the only two in the world, and I wanted to make her a gold queen before I died. Claude, my boy, I have told you all I know. I can give you no clew. I have trod the trails of the Sierras looking for my child until I have reached the dark gates that stand ajar on the borders of life. Mark Talbot has questioned me about the city of the mines until he has made me hate gold and its glitters. I have told him that a sudden blow made the most important years of my life a blank; but that does not satisfy him, though I guess he has given me up at last. I believe—I have told you this before, Claude—that we actually found the marvelous mines of the

Sierras, that our camp was built about them. It may be a dream—a wild freak of a diseased brain like mine—but I won't believe it. I say to you again, that somewhere in the Sierra Nevada are the mines of the camp we founded over the greatest gold-mines God ever made. It is a wild assertion, boy, and people would laugh at me for it; but never mind. Time will tell."

"Time and Claude Dumont!" exclaimed the young man.

"That gives me a new lease of life!" was the response. "I want my child! They have told me that she perished long ago, but it is not true. Where the mines are, or somewhere near them, she still lives. It can't be otherwise. Claude, I send you out on this mission. I have no one else to send. Trust no one. Follow the Indian if Mark Talbot sends him after the prize, and I think he will. Worm yourself into the red-skin's good graces, if you can, but beware of the slippery dog! You have been to the gold country; you know the camps and the trails that exist there. But if the Indian knows anything he will lead you into untried dangers, and into the heart of a *terra del morte*—land of death."

"I have counted all the chances, Nathan," answered the young man. "I want you to know where your child is. I don't care so much about the mines; to be plain, I think them fabulous."

"You don't know," and Nathan shook his head. "When we found them we could not believe that the whole thing was not a golden nightmare. I don't wonder that they attract a man with the wealth of Mark Talbot. I would like to know what share he promised the Indian. He kept the lion's share for himself, of course," and a smile overspread the speaker's sallow skin.

"I did not hear the bargain," Dumont replied. "Of course not. No one did. Talbot is shrewd, cool and cruel. He has tortured me times without number, and all to further enrich himself. He wants to make Medora—that ward of his—empress of a billion in gold. I know the man and his hopes. Why, Claude, I knew him when a lot of stalwart miners, like I used to be, gave him ten minutes to quit camp for theft. Now look at him. Nabob of 'Frisco, and wants more! I want but one thing in this world—my child!"

And the man fell back, with the last word dying like a heart-rent wail above his head.

All at once Dumont sprang to his feet and went to the door.

Nathan's eyes followed him, but he said nothing.

He saw the young man listen a few seconds with his hand at the latch, then he opened the door almost noiselessly and looked out.

The little house was on one of the quiet streets of 'Frisco, and the nearest lamp was at the corner some yards away.

In front of the house itself stood a tree whose branches touched the building and darkened the entire front.

Dumont saw nothing, but for all this his suspicions were aroused.

He was certain that his ears, which never deceived him, had caught a sound which meant something.

He shut the door, but went immediately to a window alongside.

The curtains hung together, and the shutters were drawn.

Claude Dumont parted the former and placed his eyes close to the pane.

The next moment he almost let a cry slip from his throat.

Something dropped to the ground from the lower branches of the tree.

It came down with the noiseless fall of the panther, but it was human.

The young man saw it straighten between house and tree; but that was not all.

He saw that the figure so supple, cat-like and powerful was Red Cloud, the Klamath!

There was something so indignant in the thought that the Indian should be playing spy, that Dumont felt his blood grow hot.

Once he thought of rushing out and confronting the red serpent, but he held himself back.

Red Cloud still wore the same hat through which we have seen him drive his knife in Mark Talbot's garden; but he had discarded his broadcloth for buckskin shirt and fringed leggings.

He was Indian once more!

For several moments he stood where he had alighted, and looked at the house.

"The red-skin has stripped himself for the trail," thought Dumont. "I must do the same."

At that moment the Indian moved off as if he had seen enough; and Dumont sprang to Nathan's cot.

"I must go!" he cried, catching the old man's hand.

"Who was it?"

"The Indian—Mark Talbot's red spy!"

"Then after him! Play as good a hand as they do, Claude, and don't come back without my child."

"I'll find her or perish!" was the response, and then Dumont vanished.

CHAPTER IV.

A CROWD OF TOUGHS.

It is three months later and we are no longer in the chief city of the Golden State.

Instead of the buildings of San Francisco, we see the tall peaks and wooded slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

Here and there the gigantic trees are tipped with gold, and the shrubbery of the trails has put on garments of brown.

Far above the mountains slowly floats the great vulture of the Sierras, and in the passes lie the shadows that never quit them.

Through a lonely canyon whose walls rise to a wonderful height, with scarcely a crevice or jutting rock to break the view, a man is advancing on a well-fagged little horse.

The rider himself shows no signs of fatigue.

His looks indicate that he is young, though the grime of the mountain trails has penetrated his skin as it were and colored his eyebrows and the hair that escapes from his hat.

At the end of the canyon he draws rein and looks down into a collection of cabins and shanties which drew from him a faint smile.

There is day enough left for him to count the various houses if he minds to, and he looks at the camp a few moments as if he is mentally doing so.

"Something is going on down yonder. There is a crowd in the square," he says, and then he urges his horse forward, and rides toward the camp in the mountains.

The way is yet rough. There is no perceptible trail, as if the inhabitants had buried themselves among the everlasting hills.

All at once he comes upon a board nailed crosswise to a tall pine with a lightning scar.

He smiles again as he looks up and reads the roughly-lettered inscription on the board:

"THIS AR' BLISTER.

NOBODY WANTED HYER.

TAKE NOTICE!"

"I guess they won't eat a man alive," murmurs the rider of the little horse, and then he moves on again and suddenly finds himself on the main street of the dangerous camp.

Suddenly, we say, for he rode around the base of a hill and was in Blister.

Right ahead he saw the square he had noticed from the high ground at the mouth of the canyon.

He could now see the separate figures that made up the crowd congregated about a big red-shirted man who stood on the head of a whisky barrel, and was trying to sell by auction a bundle which he held at arm's length for the inspection of all.

"How much, gents? How much am I offered for a dead man's effects? Only one dollar from Moccasin Monte, who doesn't know how many bonanzas he may be getting at a bargain. Bid lively thar! The parcentage on this sale ain't big enough to waste wind on. I sha'n't fool with the article. One dollar—only one—one—one! Hang it all! can't you appreciate a good thing when you see it?"

The auctioneer's remarks drew out several coarse laughs from the crowd, and an extra quarter started him off with more animation.

The young man on the horse drew near apparently unperceived, and at length he quietly halted and listened to the sale.

Bidding grew lively and was more in jest than earnest until the bundle was knocked off for six dollars and was tossed toward the edge of the crowd where it was caught by a pair of enormous bronze hands amid a general laugh.

"That ends the sale, gents, and Moccasin Monte kin settle the bill at the bar, my commission and all. He isn't compelled ter open his purchase afore the crowd, but if he's drawn a prize—a gold-mine map, or anything like thet—we'd like ter hear from him. Eh, Monte?"

Moccasin Monte looked at the auctioneer, and assured him and the crowd that he would communicate his success in case he met with any.

"Hello! Before I leave the bar'l, I want ter introduce somebody ter Blister," continued the crier, and the young stranger saw himself singled out and designated by a wave of the hand.

"Ride up, pard, er stand erect in yer stirrups. Gents o' Blister, behold a chap what won't refuse ter celebrate his coming among us by settin' 'em up all around. This ar' Blister City, pard, an' you ar'—"

The youth upon whom all eyes were turned felt called on to reply.

"My name is Jackson Janes," said he, taking off his hat and saluting the tough customers who regarded him. "I am willing to comply with the customs of the camp."

"Hooray for Jackson!" vociferated the auctioneer throwing his hat into the air and catching it deftly as he jumped from the barrel. "We keep a standin' warnin' ter all persons, sir, but we honor it more in the breach than in the observance; by Jove! we do."

The next moment the stalwart crier stood at the horse's head, and was speaking to the young man about the healthiness of Blister City and its "congenial society."

"The clothes I sold awhile ago b'longed ter a

man what drifted hyer a few days since," he said among other things. "He ain't hyer now," and a smile went through the crowd. "It war an episode of Blister City—one that don't happen often. No; I guess the man won't come back ter claim the clothes. Such is life. Whar's Monte? He was ter pay the six dollars at Old Resolute's counter."

Some one said that the purchaser of the dead man's property had gone to inspect it, and when another tough suggested that Monte's credit was good at the bar, there was an involuntary movement on the part of all.

Jackson Janes turned his horse and, flanked by the toughest looking set he had probably ever met, rode toward the indispensable mountain groggery.

More than one man made a study of him. They scrutinized him from head to foot, took in every visible square inch, and even subjected his horse to almost as close an inspection.

By the time the procession had reached the well-built cabin known as "Old Resolute's," the young man had been well looked over.

It was evident that the verdict was somewhat against him, for the sharp-eyed toughs could see that beneath his begrimed exterior there was the true gentleman with whom they were at war.

Janes dismounted at the door of the cabin, and went in with the rest—about forty in all. He saw beyond the door a few sorry card-tables and a counter, the latter presided over by a man whose eyes were already snapping over prospective custom.

Drinks were high in Blister City, and Moccasin Monte's six dollars did not go far; in fact, they barely went round.

When it came the young man's turn to treat, he did so cheerfully, and amid the clinking of the heavy glasses his health was drank in boisterous style.

"Never been hyer afore, hey?" asked the bartender over the counter, as he caught young Janes's eye.

"No, sir."

"Blister City has the name of being exclusive, but we ain't so much that way as we used ter be. We're kind o' lost ter ther outside world. Thar ain't another camp within forty miles that we know of. Hence the term 'exclusive,' I presume."

"You forget the haunted ranch," said the late auctioneer, with a little laugh.

"I don't take thet inter consideration," replied the bartender, turning to Janes. "Thet's a shell of a camp what war deserted long afore we founded Blister hyer. Haunted? They say it is, but thar's a standin' offer of ten dollars ter ther man what sees a real genuine ghost in the diggin's. Look thar, sir."

The man pointed to a placard suspended above the fly-specked bottles on the shelves behind the bar.

Jackson Janes followed his finger, and read:

"TEN DOLLARS REWARD

WILL BE PAID AT THIS BAR

TO THE PERSON

WHO FINDS A REAL, GENUINE

GHOST

AT HAUNTED RANCH!"

The young man smiled at the quaint arrangement of the lines on the pasteboard.

"Thet's been thar six months an' nary ghost yet," continued the whisky-seller—and he threw a triumphant glance toward the auctioneer.

"Where is the Ranch?" asked Janes quietly.

"About ten miles from hyer. Do you want ter compete for the reward? It's kind o' dangerous it seems."

"How so?"

"A deadly fate follers ther person who tries it."

Before the stranger could press his natural inquiries further, a loud cry was heard at the door, and the burly form of Moccasin Monte was seen there.

In an instant Haunted Ranch and its ghosts were forgotten, and the crowd seemed to bend forward in its eagerness to hear the man speak.

"Blamed ef it warn't a bonanza after all!" cried Monte, advancing with an old-fashioned pocketbook above his head. "The next time you fellers conclude ter sell a dead man's property you want ter look inter it first."

"What did yer git, Monte?" cried half a dozen voices.

"More'n you think. Let me at ther counter."

Of course the toughs made way for their comrade and a minute later ther purchaser of the dead man's wardrobe laid six golden eagles side by side on the board.

There was a craning of dark necks forward, and several exclamations of wonder.

"Thet ain't all!" said Monte, coolly meeting the score of looks that transfixed him and the money. "Thet's ther smallest part o' the wealth."

"Lay it all out."

Moccasin Monte assumed an air of mystery, and shook his head.

"You'll excuse me, gentlemen," said he. "I

desire to keep to myself, for awhile, at least, the rest of the find. I have only this to say: Whenever you get a chance, buy a dead man's outfit. You don't know what ye'r' gettin' but you kin afford ter take ther risk."

Without another word the pard of Blister City picked up four of the coins, and with a significant wave of his hand toward the bartender, walked out leaving the crowd in a state of momentary bewilderment and amaze.

Nothing was said for a spell, then some enthusiastic tough cried "Hooray for Monte!" and the two eagles, minus six dollars, followed Jackson Janes's gold.

It was during the hilarity that followed Monte's going that the young man separated himself from the crowd and went out.

His horse was waiting for him at the door.

"Can it be that I have found the right place at last?" fell from his lips. "Have I lost the red trailer and guide—lost the six desperadoes he commands, to fall afoul of the secret? I can hardly believe it, and yet—"

At that moment his horse moved, and something fluttered to the ground.

The little incident was enough to break his sentence.

He stooped and picked up the object, and found it to be a bit of paper.

In the light of the rising moon he saw rough marks on the surface, but he could not master them.

The following moment he had put his horse between him and Old Resolute's trap, then he struck a match and held it against the saddle to read the paper.

The little light proved all he wanted, for he read on the paper an invitation which was a surprise. It said:

"Jackson Janes, come to my shanty when you git this—the next ter ther last one on the right straight ahead of yer hoss. Business!

"MOCCASIN MONTE."

"What does that tough want with me?" exclaimed the young man. "This is an invitation I intend to accept. I am here on business."

He walked through Blister City, leading his horse.

When he came to the last cabin but one, he walked up to the door and knocked.

There was no invitation to walk in.

The next second the impatient youth lifted the latch and went forward.

Moccasin Monte was leaning back in a chair at a table.

His eyes had a terrible stare, and his face was ghastly.

The tough was dead!

CHAPTER V.

THE AVENGERS.

NATURALLY enough the startling discovery sent a thrill through the young man.

Had he been summoned to the cabin that he might find its occupant a corpse? Was the message which had fluttered from the saddle a forgery gotten up by some one who had been at the shanty before him?

One question chased the other swiftly through his mind.

He had shut the door, and was alone with the dead.

On one of the walls of the hut hung a tin lamp, whose not over-clean reflector threw a light over the man in the chair.

An ominous stillness filled the place.

When Jackson Janes had recovered from the sudden shock of his discovery, he walked forward and took a closer view of the Sierra tough.

Then he saw that which had escaped his eye—a darkish spot nearly as large as his hand on the bosom directly over the stilled heart.

Moccasin Monte had been killed!

There were no signs of a struggle about, and the young stranger could only wonder how a giant like Monte had been taken off so easily.

"I don't want to be found here," cried he. "I have entered a paradise of toughs, where murder seems to be a fine art. They lynched the man whose clothes were sold to the highest bidder a while ago. My life wouldn't be worth an empty cartridge if I was to be found with this body. If Moccasin Monte wrote the message, I will never know why he wanted to see me. If the slayer did it, the mystery may solve itself by and by."

Young Janes did not turn from the dead until he had discovered that the tough had been killed by one terrible blow. He saw, too, that the deadly dagger had been delivered with a downward stroke, as if the killer had stood over his victim.

His guess was that the pard of Blister City had been killed in his chair.

Five minutes hardly elapsed between the discovery and the stranger's resolve to leave the cabin.

He could not afford to be found there.

He left the dead alone, and went out.

The horse he had left before the hut was there still. This time there was no message on the saddle.

"I think I want to get away from here," he exclaimed. "I believe I got a clew to the prize

at Old Resolute's bar, and it may turn out that I was lucky to lose the red guide and his comrades."

"Hello, thar. Don't be in a hurry, pard," rung out a voice that startled Janes. "I'm a committee o' one ter extend ter you ther hospitalities of Blister."

The next moment the speaker came up with a singularly quiet tread for one in heavy boots, and the young stranger looked into the face of the auctioneer who called himself Trinidad Tom.

There was no retreat now.

"Been up ter see Monte's find, eh?" continued the mountain pard, with a glance at the cabin. "Did he show you what he found in the dead man's duds?"

"No."

"By Jericho! let's pump the old chap. What! is he asleep in the chair thar?" And Trinidad Tom's rough face almost touched the window when he leaned toward the scene Janes had just left.

The youth stood thrilled and spellbound.

"Gone ter sleep over his find, eh? Men like Monte don't do thet very often. You've just left him, hey? Wake up hyar, an' give a pard a chance ter be heard."

The door flew open as the man spoke, and as the wind flared the light on the wall, Trinidad Tom stepped half-way inside.

"The man is dead!" he cried. "Great God! somebody has knifed the big-hearted tough of Blister City!"

Jackson Janes found himself face to face with the auctioneer of the lost camp.

"You've just left him," cried Trinidad Tom, clutching the youth's arm. "I see'd yer come out o' ther shanty just afore I came up. What war you doin' in thar?"

The gravity of the situation seemed to make the young traveler cool.

"I came to Moccasin Monte's cabin in response to an invitation," he replied. "When I opened the door I found him just as he is now—dead in his chair."

"An' invitation from Monte an' without him knowin' you afore ter-night?" exclaimed the Blisterite. "I don't understand this thing."

"It is true."

"Whar did you receive the message?"

"I found it on my saddle when I left Old Resolute's."

"Written by Monte, eh?"

"It must have been."

Trinidad Tom seemed to take a long breath.

"You kin tell this ter Blister City by an' by," was his reply.

Young Janes's eyes flashed indignantly; he could not help it.

"You don't pretend to see my hand in this?" he demanded.

"I don't know what I see. As I've said, Mr. Janes, you kin tell what you know ter ther boys. Let's go back."

Back to the half-drunken crowd at the mountain bar?

Is it a wonder that the stranger recoiled with a shudder?

To be accused of the murder of Moccasin Monte before the crowd down there meant but one thing—death!

As Trinidad Tom finished speaking, one of his hands took the bridle of Janes's horse, and the other was seen to rest on the butt of a revolver that protruded above the wide weather belt at his waist.

Moreover, there had settled down over the desperado's face, as could be seen by the light from Monte's window, an expression of sternness which boded Jackson Janes no good.

"Certainly, I'll go with you," said the youth, looking into the eyes already regarding him with the keenness of an eagle's, and a moment later the two men were walking toward the Sierra bar.

"I'm in for it among a lot of California tigers," murmured the prisoner. "This doesn't look much like keeping the promise I made a short time ago; but no one could foresee an event of this kind. Am I the victim of a plot? Have I been followed and Moccasin Monte killed to get me in the toils? Or did he write the message himself? I must stick to the latter theory, and, thank Heaven! I can produce the paper itself."

"Hyar we ar'," spoke the rough voice of Trinidad Tom, arousing the youth from his speculations, and the following moment he pushed open the door of the gold-camp den.

He was received with a shout of welcome, which was repeated when the crowd inside caught sight of his companion.

The action of Blister stopped near the door and threw up one hand to command silence.

"Gentlemen, ther wings o' death hev fallen ag'in on Blister," he said solemnly. "Moccasin Monte has been trumped by ther skeleton hand!"

In an instant a change came over the faces of the crowd.

Jackson Janes saw every eye move from Trinidad Tom to him, as if their owners divined that he knew something about the awful affair.

"Monte has been murdered," continued Trinidad Tom, before the crowd could recover. "He's

sittin' in his chair at the shanty with a bowie cut over his heart. I found this young man thar. Mebbe he kin tell something, if he will. We want blood for Monte—ther biggest an' ther kindest pard of Blister."

An echo like the mingled growl of a dozen tigers responded to the tough's words, and in the silence that followed, the fall of a leaf could have been heard.

Jackson Janes took a step toward the breathless and eager men who confronted him.

It was not the time to show the white feather.

"Your comrade, Trinidad Tom, is right when he says I have been to Moccasin Monte's," said he in a voice that had not a single quaver. "I went straight from this place to his cabin, but because I was invited thither. I hold in my hand the invitation," and the youth held up a piece of paper to the crowd which looked at it curiously. "You will see that Moccasin Monte wrote it himself, but I cannot say what he wanted with me."

"Did you find Monte dead when you got thar?" asked a voice from the center of the group.

"He was stone dead in his chair."

"Had been dead some time, eh?"

"I think so."

"What does Trinidad say?"

"I don't know much about it," answered the auctioneer tough. "I see'd the young feller come out o' Monte's shanty. He says he found ther message on his saddle when he left hyer awhile ago. We can't dispute that, for we don't know. But we do know that Monte's hand never penned it, for Monte could not write!"

Here was a revelation which Trinidad Tom had not made before.

The fellow seemed to have kept it back for purpose and effect.

"He couldn't write his own name," cried a tall man with cold gray eyes. "It war all Monte could do ter read. Thar's a lie out somewhere!"

The young stranger saw the instant effect of the tall man's words; but he resolved to hold his ground as long as possible.

"I am the deceived one, then," he responded. "I took the message for Monte's. I could not do otherwise. Gentlemen of Blister City, I did not even know the man who sits dead in his cabin to-night. I never saw him before he bought the dead man's clothes. My mission in these parts is not one of death. I trust the guilty will be punished and vengeance taken for the life of Moccasin Monte!"

When Jackson Janes concluded, the message was taken possession of by Trinidad Tom and passed through the crowd for inspection.

He saw it move from hand to hand and noted the various expressions with which it was greeted. It was evident that not all the men could read; those who could not passed it rapidly, and those who could studied it carefully a few moments.

"Let's go an' see Monte," suddenly suggested one.

The proposition took at once.

"The gent from abroad need not go. Let him stay hyer till we settle something about Moccasin's death."

Jackson Janes saw the most of the crowd rush from the mountain den.

Enough remained behind to tell him that he was to be kept under surveillance; not only this, but that his story had not been generally accepted as true.

He waited ten minutes.

The time seemed an hour of suspense.

Then he heard the toughs coming back.

All at once the door was burst open, and the men-tigers of Blister City bounded into the saloon.

They seemed surprised to see the stranger still in the trap, and there was a momentary recoil by the foremost.

"Boys, ther message war a fraud ter cover up ther assassin's tracks. Monte couldn't write, an' thar ain't no pencil about ther shanty. S'arch ther man yonder for what Monte found in ther dead pard's wallet, an' then deal out Blister City justice! Thet's what we've got ter do!"

The last man had come in, the door had been shut, and the broad back of a stalwart tough was against it.

Jackson Janes saw his peril.

All at once he stepped back from the counter, clear of the whole crowd, and the next instant he thrust out two cocked revolvers.

"Men of Blister, I have no man's blood on my hands!" he said over them. "It is for you to say whether I am to have some there to-night, or not!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PAROLE OF HONOR.

A TABLEAU of this description was the last thing looked for by the toughs of the Sierra.

There may have been a few among them who had mentally decided that the young stranger would not be pushed too close to the wall without showing a hand of some kind, but the majority thought he would "throw up the sponge," and beg for his life.

Covered by the six-shooters of Jackson Janes,

Trinidad Tom and his companions let several moments pass between the defiance and their reply.

They knew that to rush forward would be to court death for some of their number, for the finger is as quick as the eye, and their policy was to get by strategy that which it would cost blood to obtain by force.

While the youth held the crowd at bay, planted firmly in his tracks, the man who stood against the door was seen to start.

He turned half way round and laid his hand on the latch, whose click had been heard by every one in the room.

"Shall I let her in?" he asked, throwing a look toward the mob, but more especially at Trinidad Tom.

"Let nobody in!" was the quick response. "This is no girl's picnic." And the big guard was seen to put more force in his duty of keeping the person on the outside out.

Jackson Janes had not missed the emphasis of the guard.

He had made another discovery. There was somebody in Blister City besides men tigers, and that somebody was a girl who wanted to go inside.

Of course Trinidad Tom and his comrades would keep her out, and so long as a two-hundred pound tough held the entrance, she would not get to set her feet beyond the threshold.

"We don't say thar's any blood on yer hands," said the auctioneer pard when he had settled the question of the girl's admittance. "You don't want to go off in the pan. We've only given orders for a little search, seein' thet you've been ter Moccasin Monte's an' thet thet individual has been killed. It will establish yer innocence if nothin's found."

The young stranger knew what such words meant.

To be touched by the men of the mountains meant to become their prisoner, and to perish at the cry of a frenzied crowd.

His safety lay in getting out of the saloon without being touched by the bronzed hands that itched to seize him.

"It is preposterous to think that I would take the life of a man whom I never saw before to-night," said he "a man of whose existence I was not so much as aware till I came to Blister City. I know no more about Moccasin Monte now than I did yesterday. I object to being searched for what I cannot possess for reasons of my own. If the message left on my saddle was not written by the murdered man, then the hand that drove the dagger to his heart is playing also against me."

"By Jericho! it looks thet way."

More than twenty men looked at the man who had spoken thus.

He stepped to the front with a promptness that gave Jackson Janes hope.

"Let's give the boy the doubt," he continued. "We can't afford to please the assassin by noosin' the man he would like ter have us noose. It won't cost much, pards. The gentleman yonder will give us his parole while we investigate ther affair. I don't want the blood of the innocent on Blister."

It was singular how quickly the feeling seemed to change.

Here and there the remarks were sanctioned by other members of the crowd till young Janes lowered his weapons confident that he would not be pushed to use them.

"Will you give your parole?" asked Trinidad Tom.

"To what effect?"

"Not ter quit Blister without permission till we've settled ther killin' o' the big-hearted pard."

"You shall have it," was the reply.

The guard at the door stepped away, but the latch did not click again.

Had the girl gone?

If any one had followed her as she turned from the shanty shortly after the refusal to admit her, he would have seen her push open the door of Monte's cabin.

The lamp was still burning on the wall, but the figure of the dead sport no longer filled the chair at the table.

The crowd by whom he had been visited had placed the body on a blanket, and covered the face with a dirty cloth.

After a moment's inspection from the door, the girl, who was young, graceful in form and handsome, stole forward and raised the cloth with timid fingers.

The lamplight fell full on Monte's face as well as on her own figure.

"I wonder who did this?" she asked in audible tones, the words seeming to come from her without the least effort. "Not the young man they have corraled at Old Resolute's—no, not that person. It was not good for him that this tragedy should occur on the night of his coming to Blister City; that is against him, of course. Monte was killed for a purpose, and by some one who knew when and where to find him. Why did he do this? Monte was poor. He had nothing but his claims, and they will never enrich anybody. Ah! I recollect. Monte bought the clothes of the man whom they hanged the other night for alleged cheating at cards. Dead men's

clothes are ^{for} ^{real} property, they say. It was so for Monte."

And the girl let the mantle fall as the last words left her lips.

She remained a while longer in the shanty.

She looked here and there as if hunting for some particular object, but nothing satisfactory rewarded her search.

The girl looked disappointed.

"Maybe he did not have anything after all," she murmured. "Monte used to tell me that he'd be a bonanza king when he died. Death came too sudden; he wasn't ready, and so he died a mountain pauper instead of a gold prince."

She glanced once more at the motionless figure on the blanket, then went out, taking good care to shut the door behind her.

She went back toward the mountain trap, and stopped suddenly when she saw its door wide open and a number of men in front of the place.

"Did they take his blood for Monte's?" she cried. "It would be just like them to do so. If they have, may the vengeance of Heaven fall upon all who had a hand in it!"

"We took his parole, Meta," said a voice, so close to the girl's side that she whirled with a start.

She was confronted by a man, who came closer while she looked at him.

"We thought mebbe we'd better give him a chance," he went on. "It didn't look quite right ter draw him up without an investigation."

"It was not right," spoke the girl, boldly.

"Ha! I thought you'd approve of it. But tell me what fetched him ter Blister, an' how Trinidad came ter find him at Monte's, with Monte himself dead in his chair."

"Didn't he tell you?"

"He tried to explain—showed a bit o' paper which he claims took him thar."

"Well?"

"It invited him to ther shanty, and had Monte's name at the bottom."

"Was not that enough?"

A triumphant smile overspread the man's face.

"But Monte couldn't write!" he exclaimed. "Thar's whar it looks dark for ther chap."

The girl appeared startled.

"Can't yer see, Meta, thet it's a rayther thin story?" he resumed. "He suggests thet the person who finished Monte wrote ther message just ter put up a job on him. It's quite likely, eh?" And the citizen of Blister leaned back and looked at the young girl.

"You'll have to take his word till you find other proof," she answered.

"Thet's what ther parole means. I guess Blister opinion is well formed now, an' thet thar kin be but one result."

These words were spoken in a tone which left no doubt as to their meaning. They told Meta of Blister City that the stranger's life was still in peril.

"You are going to hunt for the man who killed Monte, I presume?" she said.

"Sart'inly, an' we'll find him, too."

"I trust so. You know the fatality that follows dead men's clothes, Saturn?"

The man started and smiled.

"It wasn't thet, Meta. I bid on the garments myself, but Monte got 'em knocked off ter him. He did come inter Old Resolute's an' proclaim in a loud voice that he had found a bonanza among ther duds."

"Did he do this?" asked the girl, eagerly.

"Yes; an' it wasn't an hour afterward when Trinidad saw ther stranger youth comin' out o' his shanty. He's yonder now, Meta," and the finger of Saturn described the figure of Jackson Janes emerging from the "headquarters" of Blister City.

The girl looked in silence, and was watched by the man who had directed her.

"Gallows food, Meta," he suddenly said, bending toward her and dropping his voice to a whisper. "We don't want them kind hyar. Whether he killed Monte er not, he came hyer for somethin'."

"What do you mean?" And Meta's hand was laid on Saturn's arm. "You dare not tell me what you think about the young man yonder."

"Not hyer. Will you go to my shanty—"

"No, to mine."

"Come along, then."

The couple walked from the ranch, and a minute afterward Meta ushered her companion into a little cabin, the best in Blister City, because the toughs had built it with a view to her comfort.

Saturn took a stool near a little table that occupied the middle of the room and looked several moments at the girl before he spoke.

"Thar's more than one o' 'em. I'm convinced of it now," he began at last. "The young fellow who calls himself Jackson Janes is but one of a gang. I saw something last night that was so strange, Meta, that it's a wonder I've kept it, since they say, 'Never tell Saturn anything if you want it ter stay at home.' Something so funny for these parts, girl, that I've thought sometimes that I war dreamin'."

"What was it, Saturn?"

"I war comin' in when I saw it. You may not hev missed me, but I've been away two days prospectin' on the other side o' Haunted Ranch. I left ther ranch ter ther left several miles or so, an' war just about ter enter Silver Gulch when I noticed some one ahead o' me. I saw in a second look that it war an Injun, an' as reds ar' scarce hereabouts, I used a little strategy an' crept close ter him. Jericho! what a well-built Injun he war!—naked ter ther waist, and muscled like an acrobat. What do yer think he war doin', Meta?"

The girl shook her head and showed her teeth in a smile.

"Bless me, if he warn't throwin' a long-bladed knife into ther air an' lettin' it fall onto a bat that lay on ther ground at his feet. He hit center every time. I never saw ther like. It war practice, Meta, but ther queerest kind I ever saw."

"Was that all, Saturn?"

"No. Presently six men joined the Injun. He stopped his knife-throwin', an' ther whole gang went off together. That is what I saw last night, girl."

"It is strange," was the reply, after a moment's silence.

"I thought so."

"And you connect Jackson Janes, as you call him, with the Indian and his friends?"

"I can't help it."

"Is it fair, Saturn?"

"Fair or not, Meta, you must let me have my opinion," growled the Blister sport.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST FOUND.

SATURN of Blister City had witnessed in the depths of the Sierras the same scene which had startled and interested Sunshine Sam, the detective, three months before in the gardens of Mark Talbot, the 'Frisco millionaire.

Of course the performer with the knife and the hat was Red Cloud the Klamath, whose hand we saw draw a circle on the nabob's map of the mysterious land of treasure and death.

Let us go to him.

At about the time when Saturn was relating his adventure to Meta, a horse was carrying a half-naked rider over a trail lighted here and there by the moon.

A mass of black hair shook about his neck and danced on his dark shoulders, and his head was protected by a hat with a broad brim, and a band that had scales like the skin of a snake.

He was some miles from Blister City, and was riding away from it still.

"Hel-lo, thar!" suddenly sung out a voice, and the Indian rider drew rein and leaned forward to inspect the human-shaped figure that leaned against a tree at the edge of the trail.

"You ride like you don't intend to stop this side o' perdition!" laughed the man at the tree.

A smile appeared at the Indian's mouth, and his eyes glittered.

"Where all the rest?" he asked.

"Back o' hyer a bit," was the answer. "Whar have you been?"

"Up there," and the red-skin nodded in the direction from which he had come.

"What news?"

"None."

The white man, who was powerfully built, growled out something incoherent, and shook his head.

"It's the same old report," he went on. "Look hyer, Red Cloud."

The Indian was all attention, and quietly waited for the speaker to proceed.

"You don't want to forget what you promised Colonel Talbot. You assured him that you war able ter guide us to the lost city of the Sierra. I saw with my own eyes the circle you drew on the map."

"The ring Red Cloud's hand made!" exclaimed the Indian.

"The ring within the ring. I see you have an excellent memory."

"The Indian forgets nothing. He swore to lead the Silent Six of the 'Frisco gold king into the land where the treasure is."

"Well, whar ar' we now?"

There was no reply, and for a moment the white man eyed the Indian with mingled disappointment and disgust.

"We left 'Frisco three months ago," he resumed, inwardly cursing the red-skin's silence.

"Three months of trailing, and what have we found?"

The Indian drew back and looked haughtily at the growler from the saddle.

"If the white hunter is tired he can go back," cried he. "He knows the trails that lead to the fine houses and beautiful streets of the gold king's capital."

"We don't know one of them. We are bewildered—lost in these mountains, as if we were blindfolded in the wilds of Africa. Our oath is to follow wherever you lead. You have not seen a man falter since we started out. We were promised some tough times. You talked of gold-camps in these mountains inhabited by desperadoes who would resist us if they guessed our mission. We have not found them."

"The fighting time has not come," quickly

answered the red-skin. "Does my white brother yearn for it?"

"Not particularly, Red Cloud," he responded, smiling.

"Does he want to go back to 'Frisco?"

"Not without the secret!"

"Then, let him seal his lips and wait."

The man under the tree swallowed this rejoinder with an effort, and he sent an angry look at the Indian who intended that the words should cut like a knife.

"Oh, yes, we kin wait, for we have ter," he answered. "We are workin' for the colonel—we know no master but him. We are Mark Talbot's men, soul an' body almost. We go back with the lost city discovered, or we go not back at all!"

"That is brave. Red Cloud likes to lead such men. Shall we go to camp, Marlo?"

The white man placed himself beside the Indian's horse, and ten minutes afterward the pair came upon a party of five sheltered by the wall of a canyon whose top was lost in the far distance above their heads.

A torch sticking in a cleft in the wall threw a lively glare over the camp, revealing the resolute faces and the splendid figures of the quintette.

Some of them greeted the Indian with looks of eager questioning, and one in particular threw down the greasy cards he held and sprung up.

"What news have you now, Red Cloud?" he cried.

The savage looked at him, but made no reply. "The same old story—nothin'!" growled the tough, turning to his companions. "Three months out an'—nothin'!" and he laughed derisively while the Indian's eyes got a new gleam and his hands moved nervously at his sides.

All at once Red Cloud turned his back on the party and walked into the shadows that lay just beyond the torch's light.

The five white men watched him suddenly until his figure disappeared.

"The red has found something," whispered one. "He never acted that way before. Where did he come from, Marlo?"

"From the North," replied the man who had halted the Indian in the trail.

"What did he say?"

"That he had no news."

"He has news. I'm used ter readin' Injun eyes." And the speaker got up. "The time has come for something. Colonel Talbot will send out another set of men if we don't make some kind of a report soon. I guess I come nearer being the red-skin's confidant than any of you!"

"Try him, Merle."

The man called Merle walked after the Indian and lost himself among the shadows.

"What has become of the red?" he asked himself, when, five minutes later, he stood on the bed of the canyon with an endless wall on either side and the stars overhead.

"Red Cloud is here, Merle," came the reply, and the next moment the white man was touched by an unseen hand which sent a thrill through his frame. "Does Merle seek to know what Red Cloud has discovered?" continued the same voice.

"That's why I'm here, chief."

The hand tightened on the sport's arm and he was led away without a word.

Side by side the Klamath and the white man went down the canyon until the former turned abruptly aside almost dragging his companion after him.

"The Klamath has found something," said the Indian's voice. "He has come from the camp of the gold-diggers."

"From what camp?" cried Merle. "I did not know there was a camp within miles of us."

"It is very near, Merle."

"If you say so, I'll believe it, chief; but why haven't we run across it in our wanderings through these goldless hills? Didn't you want us to find it, eh?"

Before the Indian replied he struck a light which, as it flared up, showed the two men to be in a narrow passage leading abruptly from the canyon—a pathway between walls of solid rock.

"Merle shall see what Red Cloud has found," he continued. "He shall know that the Indian intends to keep his compact with the money chief of 'Frisco."

While he spoke the Indian was stripping the stones of some peculiar moss which he stuffed into a crevice near at hand and set on fire.

"You've made fires before, I see," laughed the white man, as the material burned slowly, but with light enough for all practical purposes. "I've trusted you all along, Red Cloud; I'm not one of the growlers."

Red Cloud said nothing, but proceeded to take from beneath his belt a bit of dark paper which had been folded so long that the creases had worn through.

Merle, the sport, watched it with intense interest from the first.

The Indian was in no hurry; he opened the paper with a slowness that only increased his companion's excitement, and when he had it spread, thrust it forward on the palm of his red hand.

"There!" said he, looking up at the white man, who bent forward eagerly. "My brother will see that Red Cloud did not come back empty-handed."

The white sport picked the paper out of the Indian's hand, and tried to inspect it by the fire in the rock.

"By Jupiter! it'd take a Philadelphia lawyer to make it out," he exclaimed, glancing up into the Indian's face. "Maybe it doesn't amount to anything."

Red Cloud's eyes seemed to light up with resentment.

"Would the Klamath bring to Merle a paper that fools him?" he cried. "Does my brother think that the hand of the Klamath, who is bound to the gold king by an oath, would give him a lie?"

"Not that, Red Cloud. I don't think anything of the kind. I know that you cannot read the writing of the whites—"

"But the Indian knows what he wants."

"Yes, yes! Let me look at the paper."

Merle went closer to the wall and began to study the document, while Red Cloud folded his arms on his breast, and stepping back, looked on.

The white man saw that the paper had once been covered with writing and marks which had been distinct, but time and rough usage had rendered all nearly illegible.

He studied it several minutes before looking again at the Indian.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"At the gold camp."

"Who had it?"

"In the first place, a white man who died a few days ago."

"Ah! you found it among a dead man's effects, Red Cloud?"

"The Klamath took it from the dead."

"From a putrid corpse, chief?"

Red Cloud threw up one of his hands, and it alighted on Merle's shoulder.

"What does my brother think? Red Cloud does not rob the dead, whom the mountain wolves would not touch," he cried. "As he has said, he took the talking paper from the dead, but the body was not cold. Does Merle understand?"

A sudden exclamation fell from the sport's tongue.

The Indian's language admitted of but one construction. It went through Merle's mind like a flash of light.

He had taken a life for the paper.

"I see," he answered, thrusting the document toward Red Cloud. "Do you think the game was worth the candle, chief?"

"Would it be here if I thought it worth nothing?"

"I should think not."

"Then let Merle listen to his red brother. Before two suns set we will stand at the door of the lost city of the marvelous mines. Red Cloud has made the paper talk even if he cannot read the written language of the pale-faces. He did not go to the camp of the gold-diggers for nothing. His eyes found and his hand worked! Remember, Merle. Before two suns have set we will hold the key that unlocks to the man in 'Frisco more wealth than all its money kings possess."

The paper was folded and replaced in the Indian's belt, and a minute later the two men went back toward their companions.

"After all my shadowing I'm striking pay dirt at last. At the door of Mark Talbot's lost mines, eh? By Jove! I'd like to telegraph the captain, but I can't. I'll do it from 'Frisco when I get back."

The man, the speaker, standing on the spot just vacated by Merle and the Indian, was the independent shadow, Sunshine Sam.

CHAPTER VIII.

DIAMOND CUTS DIAMOND.

It was a strange quest that had brought the New York detective across the continent to the heart of the Sierras.

He had been two months in San Francisco when we introduced him to the reader in the sunshine of Golden Gate Park.

He had embarked on a trail which ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have laughed at and given up from the first; but Sunshine Sam was the hundredth man.

Some time before the actual beginning of our story, a strange tale was poured into his ears in New York.

And what made it impressive was the fact that it came from the lips of a man who was dying.

Dying men sometimes let out incredible things in their delirium, but few who yield to the destroyer in New York tell marvelous tales of lost wealth in the Sierra Nevada.

Sunshine Sam's man had not led the best of lives.

He was a tough character who had "graduated" in the wild West—a man of nerve, and by no means scrupulously honest.

Sunshine Sam heard from his tongue the first intimation of the buried camp of the mountains.

Chad Bartwick claimed to have been a miner as well as nearly everything else.

He told how, with a party of others he had found some old gold-mines which had been abandoned many years before, how they had built a camp there, how one night a war-party of savages swooped down on them like a pack of avenging eagles, how he was the only person who came off with life.

Fear had kept him from going back until long after the massacre.

When he went he could not find anything, no trace of the camp, not even a familiar landmark.

The mines had been blotted out of existence as it were—wiped out by the hand of fate.

He told, too, how Mark Talbot, a 'Frisco nabob, wanted to find the trail, how he eagerly questioned everybody likely to know, how he had been deceived by adventurers, and how he had never abated his sworn intentions.

"Some day the right man will come to Talbot," the ex-miner said to Sunshine Sam. "This search will reach the ear of one of those red Arabs who came down on the camp that night. He will buy the secret. If you want it, you want to watch for the right man."

Such was the beginning of the detective's quest.

He had no crime to avenge this time, no flattering reward goaded him down the path of retribution.

The new trail came to him when murder and robbery seemed to be taking a rest, and with nothing but the story of the old mountain rough for a pointer, he came to 'Frisco to watch for the man who was to open the gold El Dorado for the millionaire.

We have seen how he heard the compact at the nabob's house and how he saw the red hand of the Klamath draw the circle on the map.

It was enough.

Sunshine Sam believed that "the right man" had come at last.

He knew nothing about the Indian's antecedents; he did not care to know.

Red Cloud was to lead Talbot's men—the Silent Six—to the lost mines. That was enough.

In the three months during which we have lost sight of the gold-seekers, Sunshine Sam had not been idle.

Like a shadow he had kept at the Indian's heels.

More than once he thought that Red Cloud had undertaken a task he never could accomplish. Fifty times the labyrinths of the mountains seemed to bewilder even the keen Klamath.

The detective had heard the six men grumble; he saw them watch the Indian when they were not suspected. They more than half believed that Red Cloud was deceiving them as he had deceived their master.

Sunshine Sam knew nothing of the tragic event of Blister City until he guessed it from Red Cloud's talk to Merle and the exhibition of the paper which he said would give them the clew to the lost camp before the close of two days.

He let the Indian and his friend go back to their comrades. The spy who had learned under Captain Coldgrip's eye knew how to shadow in the mountain as well as in the city.

Red Cloud glanced at the game still going on in the light of the torch in the rock, and left Merle with the players while he passed on.

The Indian led his horse by the bridle and kept forward until, several hundred feet above the little camp, he halted on a bare flat rock covered by the uninterrupted moonshine.

There his magnificent figure loomed forth like a giant's, and the motionless form some yards away and in the shadows, watched him like a hawk.

More than once during the three months trail had Sunshine Sam studied the Indian in the soft light of moon and stars.

And now that a valuable paper reposed under the red-skin's belt, he was more than ever an object of interest.

The bonanza detective did not let a movement of the Indian's escape his vigilant eye.

The camp was behind and beneath Red Cloud.

He knew that neither Merle nor any of his companions had followed him.

The rock on which he stood was somewhat higher than the trail which had brought him to it. It overlooked a rough canyon with perpendicular walls, and beyond it miles of wild scenery.

Sunshine Sam saw the Indian thrust his hands beneath the blanket that his horse wore.

The next moment he drew forth a flat pocket which he opened in the moonlight, and then the spy saw the flame of a match.

All at once something soared above the red-skin's head like a little star aflame, then another and still another until three were in the air.

"That is a signal, but to whom?" exclaimed the detective. "Has Red Cloud brought the Silent Six into the Sierra to give some of his people more scalps? No! it cannot mean that. The compact entered into at Mark Talbot's house will keep the Indian true."

The flying stars of flame did not last long. One by one they fluttered over the edge of the trail and disappeared, leaving Red Cloud outlined as before against the sky.

"He ought to go through his hat-piercing trick now," observed Sam. "I've seen it twenty times since I left 'Frisco. He never wearies of it, and never fails to pierce the hat in the center. Ah! he is through with his signals. He is coming back."

Sunshine Sam saw the Indian step from the rock and turn his face toward the camp of the six.

"Why not?" murmured the detective. "The paper is in his belt, and I might as well have it as the red. More than one puzzle have I studied out. I like them."

Nearer and nearer came the Indian, walking at the head of his horse and totally unconscious of the proximity of the man who had been his sleuth from the hour of his compact in 'Frisco.

The advantage was with the shadower.

"I've never tried the Indian's muscle, but I know what mine is," he thought. "Red Cloud is wiry, cat-like and strong, but I have the call on him to-night."

Sam had but little time in which to make up his mind.

"Here goes for a tussle with the red. I know where the paper is, and before Red Cloud knows what's what, I'll find it in my hands," said he.

The following moment he threw a foot forward, and waited for the red guide to come a little nearer.

All at once the sleuth left his position and darted straight at the Indian.

One hand struck the red throat and closed there before Red Cloud could see his assailant, the other darted at his belt.

Sam had sprung to the attack like a panther.

"I don't want your life," he cried, as the Indian began to struggle despite the clutch of the hand under his chin. "I'm not a man of blood unless I'm riled. I want a piece of paper in your belt."

The next instant with a twist which completely surprised Sam, Red Cloud wrenched himself loose.

"Not that way!" shouted the detective, leaping at him. "You can twist out like a weasel, but not the second time."

Already the hand of Red Cloud was at his belt, but Sam's clutch was too quick for him, and it was jerked away before the knife it gripped was more than half-drawn.

"Who fights Red Cloud?" asked the Indian.

"Never mind. You will see me later, perhaps. Just now I want the document which you took from the dead man in the gold-camp."

Red Cloud gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise.

"What does the white man know?"

"A good deal you may never find out!"

The two men stood face to face on the trail, and not two feet apart.

The bronze fingers of Sunshine Sam held in bondage the knife-hand of the Indian, and eye met eye with looks of resolution.

"Shall I have it?" suddenly asked the detective.

"Red Cloud has nothing to surrender."

"You haven't, eh?" laughed the sleuth. "You have nothing between your body and the belt that girdles it? Come, Red Cloud; that will do for the marines."

"Let my brother's hand find what he seeks," was the reply. "Does he think that the child of the Klamaths carries a secret at his belt? The white man is a fool if he carries such thoughts in his head."

The red-skin was exasperated, but Sunshine Sam was not to be deceived by his words.

The left hand of the sleuth made a sudden dive at the Indian's belt, and his fingers disappeared in the place where he had lately seen the paper deposited.

It was not there!

"What does the white spy say now?" asked Red Cloud. "He carries eyes in his fingers, but they see nothing. The next time he will believe the Klamath when he speaks."

Sam was not satisfied with his attempt.

With his figure drawn proudly up, and his wrist still encircled by the spotter's hand, Red Cloud waited for the search to end.

The faint likeness of a smile appeared at the corners of the red lips.

"Ha! My white brother looks for pearls where none ever grew!" suddenly cried the Indian. "What kind of talking paper does he want?"

"You know, you red rascal!" exclaimed Sam.

He saw Red Cloud's eyes catch a new glitter.

"Red Cloud knows, and the paper-hunter will never find out!"

And a powerful jerk broke Sam's hold, and the Indian stood erect ten feet away.

It was like the bursting of a bomb.

The detective started across the space that separated them, but the voice of Red Cloud stopped him half-way.

"If the white man would find the best knife

in California, let him touch the Klamath again!" cried the red-skin, and Sam saw the long-bladed knife in his hand. "The trail to safety lies behind the paper-hunter; the path to death before him! And Red Cloud stands in the way."

"I never go back. 'Forward to the end!' is the motto of Sunshine Sam."

The Indian's answer was the silent sheathing of the bowie, then, with a coolness that exasperated, he took the bridle of his horse and deliberately turned his back on the sleuth.

"Listen one moment, Red Cloud."

"The paper-hunter may talk to the stones," came over the Indian's shoulder, and the deliberate tramp of horse and man went on.

Sam of New York stood chagrined on the elevated trail, and watched the red-skin disappear a short distance away.

"What did he do with the document?" he asked himself. "The first blood belongs to Mark Talbot's red Satan. Captain Claude would laugh at my failure. Maybe I've deserved it after all. Let the red go. I intend to know where he got the document and whom he killed for it. The gold game of the Sierras is not out till it has been played out, Red Cloud. It is a long way between here and the promised wife in 'Frisco." And with a chuckle, not very triumphant, Sam went down over the trail to meet again the coolest foe he ever had.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NAILS IN THE SOLE.

JACKSON JANES, under his parole of honor had the freedom of Blister City, but the privilege was a hampered one.

After the tragic events which nearly cost him his life, to say nothing of the bloodshed that might have followed an attack upon him at the saloon of the Sierras, he was shown to a cabin which he was told he could inhabit while he remained in the camp.

He knew that he was an object of espionage by the men of the mountains, and, while removed from the shadow of death which had come over him, he felt that he was still in deadly peril.

At any time a word, a hot oath, or even the crooking of a finger, might be sufficient to make him fight against terrible odds for his life.

Despite this state of affairs, the young man slept soundly in the quarters to which he had been assigned.

Several times during the night dark figures stole to the shanty and listened at door and window.

They always came singly and with short intervals between the visits, and their steps were so noiseless that the cricket that chirped unceasingly under a leaf at the door was not disturbed.

The next day the body of Moccasin Monte was prepared for its mountain burial, and a lot of stern-visaged men carried it past the young man's cabin to its wild sepulcher.

Nearly the entire camp, two abreast, followed the murdered tough to the grave.

Jackson Janes saw them defile through the camp, and finally lose themselves among the pines.

He looked out of his window on this scene, and thought that his parole did not keep the men of Blister City from hating him with all their might.

The funeral crowd came back and went to the gold-camp den.

After awhile a heavy knock sounded on the youth's door and he admitted the chief tough of the camp, tall and stalwart Trinidad Tom, as brown as a berry, and with his pants stuffed into the tops of his cowhide boots.

The events of the night were fresh in Janes's mind, nor had he forgotten the part the Sierra giant had taken in them.

He received Trinidad Tom cordially—he felt that it stood him in hand to do it—but the Blisterite leaned against the little table almost overturning it with his weight, and complacently folded his arms.

"Wal, we've planted Monte," opened Tom, with his eyes fixed on Janes. "I presume you saw the percession go by?"

"I saw it," was the reply.

"The best man in California will have the birds singin' over his grave at sunset," continued Tom.

"I'd like ter know who did it."

"I have a curiosity that way myself."

The youth thought he saw a twinkle in the dark fellow's eyes.

"I should think you would have. Look hyer, Mr. Janes. I think I know why Monte is whar he is now—over thar under the pines."

"Well?"

"He fooled with a dead man's clothes. I'm a little superstitions myself—just enough ter think as I do. Tell me what Monte found in the clothes he bought at auction yesterday an' I'll tell you why the knife found him."

"Then he was watched?"

"Of course he war. Watched? He war seen ter discover the prize he found among the effects. A thousand ter one that it cost Monte his life."

"I half believe so."

Jackson Janes spoke the four words unconsciously.

"I know it!" cried Trinidad Tom, leaning forward and showing some animation, for his eyes seemed to change color. "Last night I war more than half convinced that you knew more than you would tell. You mustn't blame me for that. The circumstances were against you. I found you at the shanty, an' Monte war dead inside; then, you showed a message—an imertation rather—which you thought Monte wrote when he couldn't write his own name. Such war ther facts."

"That is true," assented the young man.

"In my sight you are guiltless," continued the tough. "You say you never saw Monte till yesterday. I take your word for that. You don't wear boots with a row of nails across the soles, boy."

Jackson Janes glanced down at his feet, and then held one bottom up toward Trinidad Tom.

"Look for yourself," he said, with a smile.

The Blisterite looked at the sole for a moment, and then made a gesture for the youth to put his foot down.

"I've been doin' a little detective work on my own hook," he went on. "There is a strange footprint in the earth in Monte's shanty whar a board has been missin' for more than a year. The man who killed Monte made it. The nails are in the sole—so."

Trinidad Tom drew on the table the rough diagram of a boot-sole, with a row of nails across the middle from side to side.

"I could tell this ter Blister an' convince every man in it that you didn't make that track; but I don't intend to do it," he continued. "I don't want everybody to know what I've found out, but I'm goin' ter trust you. Now, the man who gave Monte the knife took away what he found in the dead man's clothes. What was that?"

The young stranger maintained silence during which he shook his head.

"It was worth more than the ten gold eagles he spread out on Old Resolute's counter," Trinidad resumed, with a short pause for breath. "He proclaimed afore the whole camp that he had struck it rich by buying the dead chap's clothes. I b'lieve it now."

"Who was the dead man?" asked Janes.

"That is important since what has happened," was the quick response. "He called himself Noland at first, but before the boys drew him up he said his name war something else."

"Where was he from?"

"He did not and would not say. He did not play a hand just exactly squar', an' we warn't in good humor that night anyhow. So it didn't take much ter bring about what happened. It war bad for the man with two names. It war hasty on our part, too; mebbe we had better have overlooked the five aces. But it's too late now. Noland died game, though. Nobody thought of the bundle he left behind till Cactus Chad found it in his way an' proposed that we sell it for ther benefit of ther counter. If I had suspected that ther rags war worth lookin' into we'd hev Moccasin Monte among us now."

"Is that all you know about the man you hastily hanged?" inquired Janes.

"Pretty much all. The girl, Meta, had a talk with him, but he didn't tell her anything. He came hyer unknown an' died a mystery."

"It is to be deplored," replied the young man.

"A thousand times it is, because something found on his person cost Monte his life. Was it a written secret?—though men don't often carry such things around nowadays. Had he been followed by some enemy who came up too late to get Noland's life, and who had to kill Monte for the contents of the garments?"

"What do you think, Trinidad Tom?"

The old mountaineer put on a profound look when this question was asked.

"I've got an opinion," he said, mysteriously.

"I don't think thar's another like it in Blister, unless Meta possesses it. It's the same old story."

"What is that?"

"A man with a bonanza secret."

Jackson Janes started—he could not help it—but Trinidad Tom did not notice it.

"Is there a bonanza story afloat in these parts?" asked Janes.

"Not hyer, but thar's a big one elsewhar."

"Beyond these mountains?"

"Yes. Have you ever been in 'Frisco, young man?"

"I have."

"Then you must have heard—Mebbe, by Jove! you've been summoned into the presence of the nabob who is gold-mad. I've been thar! I've climbed the fine stair-cases of Mark Talbot, an' he's taken me through the question-mill. I guess we've all been thar—at least all of us who have crossed his path. Men have bled him times without number. They've sold him old diagrams of mines an' plots of country till he must have a splendid collection of such trumpery. He's got it into his head that thar's a lost city somewhar in the Sierras. I heard the story long before I saw Mark Talbot, or drank his wines while I let him pump me

dry. You kin find ther ruins o' camps hyer an' thar—camps that seemingly war deserted long before our day. It has got ter be an old story with us. We used ter hev a sign over Resolute's bar forbidin' strangers ter spin yarns about missin' mines; but Resolute took it down a year ago. I think Noland war one o' them mine cranks. That's my opinion, Mr. Janes."

"It may have been," answered the youth. "Somehow or other Monte took more stock in the bonanza story than anybody else. Meta ain't far behind him, though," and the speaker smiled. "Monte used ter say that Mark Talbot knew what he war about, an' he listened ter these stories with a willin' ear. It is a fraud—a fraud that eventually took Monte from us. The whole thing is a sham."

"The lost city, you mean?"
"Yes."
"Then, you don't take any stock in it."
"Not a particle!"
"Do you think Monte was killed for a worthless bit of paper?"

"Yes, if he found a pretended bonanza key in the dead man's pocketbook. Have you come hyer ter find the lost camp for Mark Talbot?"

"No."
"If you have, you might as well turn your back on Blister City. You hunt that which does not exist."

"I have heard an odd story about the lost mines," said Janes unabashed by Trinidad Tom's words.

"I presume I've heard it, too."
"It is about the party of men who founded a camp where the old mines are said to exist."
"That is it! The winter war too hard on 'em an' they all died but one, eh?"

"Yes, the winter and then the Indians."
"Wal, I've seen that survivor multiplied forty times!" laughed the Blister City sport. "He's the most numerous 'lost man' I ever heard of—turns up every few years. I saw him in 'Frisco last."

"What did he call himself?"
"Nathan something. He claims ter have lost a child the night the Injuns came down on the camp. It's his hobby. We know Nathan. He's a little out o' fix hyar," and Trinidad Tom drew a dark finger across his forehead. "When you git as mad as 'Frisco Nathan, may the Lord pity ye, boy."

Jackson Janes's reply was a look which the head sport of Blister City could not interpret.

"We'll know afore long just what drove the dagger downward inter Monte's breast. Woe to the wretch who handled the steel! If he killed Monte for a fool's map of a bonanza that has no existence except in a mad-man's brain, so much the worse for him. The nails across the boot is proof enough to hang him. Blister City will come out on top in the end. I want you to see Meta before your parole ends. She's the angel of the Sierras, an' Blister will stand by her through thick an' thin!"

Two minutes later, Jackson Janes was the only occupant of the cabin.

"Is all this true?" he cried. "Have I listened to the story of a madman? Did I swear to throw my life away in search of a child who never lived? If this is true—"

He stopped suddenly, for the door had opened, and Meta, the angel of Blister City, stood before him.

CHAPTER X.

A COOL HEAD.

THE girl who had come so unexpectedly was beautiful.

A little above medium hight, she had clear blue eyes, a fresh skin, and a graceful, willowy figure.

The mountain air that had tanned the men of Blister, had spared her cheeks. She was a vision of Wild West loveliness when she halted before the occupant of the cabin, and smiled at his surprise.

"I am Meta—Meta of Blister," said she, after Janes's stammering "good-morning." "I want to congratulate you on your lucky escape last night. It was what we'd term a close call. I hardly know what saved you, though Saturn thinks it was the pard who spoke out at the crisis."

"He undoubtedly helped to turn the tide, but it is over now, and we need not refer to it."

"Just as you like," answered the girl with another smile. "We do not have such scenes often here. They can't get over the horror of Monte's death, and they will not until they have dealt with the person who did it. But I am here to tell you what Saturn says."

"Who is Saturn?" asked the young man.
"He belongs here. He is one of the founders of Blister City, and a man of funny ideas and singular opinions. He has an odd one about you?"

"About me?" echoed Janes.

"About you. Saturn says you are here on a bonanza mission. I don't know how such an idea came to enter his head, but it is there."

Jackson Janes, who had started over Meta's second sentence, was outwardly calm again at the close of the third.

"Does he think all strangers who find their way to Blister City are on a hunt of that kind?"

"I don't know; he mentioned you only. That is why I am here. If you are pospecting, I may be able to help you."

"Ah! do you know something about the bonanza of the Sierras?" exclaimed Janes.

"Not much, but then I may give you a little information. We don't get rich here. If you should stay a while in Blister, you would come to the conclusion that they didn't drive stakes here because of any flattering prospects. We've got a mine or two, but they are nothing. This is within the borders of No-Gold Land. Isn't it strange to you?"

The young adventurer confessed that it was very singular, and his words told Meta that she had increased his curiosity.

"A gold-camp where there is no gold!" she cried. "A lot of men cooped up in the Sierras like chickens in a yard! I thought it would seem incomprehensible to you. And you are from 'Frisco, too—from the city where one hears all manner of stories about these mountains."

"I am from 'Frisco, but not very lately," replied Janes. "I may be on the trail of a bonanza, and I may not. I did not know that Blister City existed, till I suddenly discovered it from the mouth of a gulch."

"That's why they built it here. You can see it from but one place, and that is the one from which you saw it. We call it Dead Gold Gulch, because the east wall in the afternoon wears a dead gold color. This is a land of strangeness. I have been to its borders and looked out—out upon the world that lies beyond. I'm going to tell you about Blister—why it was built here, and by whom."

"I should like to hear," said Janes.

Meta went first to the door and looked out. The stranger watched her admiringly while she stood there, and he might have wondered, from his countenance, whether their lives were not to become inseparable in No-Gold Land.

Meta at length came back and resumed her old place against the table, with one of her faultless hands resting on its rough surface.

"Blister is a dead camp—that is, it is buried from the outside world by the mountains. It has a code of laws which forbids any of its citizens from going beyond a certain line. It is death for one of them to transgress the code."

"What brought about such a law?"

Jackson Janes asked the question mechanically.

"I am going to tell you. The ten men who founded Blister came thither in search of a lost mine said to exist somewhere in the Sierra. They found it not. Month after month they tramped over the wild trails, froze on the mountain tops, and starved in the canyons. At last they banded themselves together and formed the Eternal League. They swore to remain here the rest of their lives. Now and then some prospector, adventurer or sport would spy out Blister. He would be forced to join the League. Only twice did men utterly refuse. One sleeps where they put Monte to-day: the other escaped to die from wounds among the pines. The law is terribly binding. Man after man joined the band until Blister reached the numbers it holds at this time. We are in the heart of No-Gold Land. The mines yield enough for living purposes, and the pards of Blister are content. Some of them would not exchange their station for a palace in 'Frisco."

"Are you happy here?" asked Janes.

"Oh, yes. I belong to the Eternal League—its only female member," was the answer.

"They would not carry out the law on you if you crossed the boundary?"

"I should not like to tempt them."

"This is cruel!" exclaimed the young man with spirit.

"It is the code of Blister City."

"But what put it into the heads of its originators? Was it their failure to find the bonanza they started out to find?"

"That, and a queer whim of Saturn's."

"Oh! then, Saturn is one of the originals?"

"He drew up the law," smiled Meta. "They whisper—well, never mind what they say," and the girl colored. "Nobody looks for bonanzas now; nobody but Meta, I am told," she added with a merry laugh that showed her white teeth.

"Have you found any?" asked Janes in a bantering tone.

"Not yet."

"Then, you do not despair."

"I never give up. I believe I could find something if it were not for the code."

"Is Haunted Ranch within the boundaries?"

Meta gave a quick start and looked closely at the youth.

"It is just inside and hardly that," was her reply. "Have you been there?"

"No."

"I have."

"What is it like, Meta?"

"A wild spot where an old camp once stood. When Blister was founded there were the remains of cabins there, and some bones; but they're all gone now."

"How did they disappear?"

"Saturn and his pards burned all they could. They seemed determined to blot from existence all traces of the old camp. There is nothing there now but a log or two, and some odd letters cut into the gulch walls. There are men here in Blister who believe that the old place is haunted, but Old Resolute's standing offer for a ghost has never had a taker. They say that a money king in 'Frisco questions every mountain, man he finds about the Sierras. Is that true?"

"It is."

"Who is the man?"

"They call him Mark Talbot."

Meta repeated the name in an audible murmur as if it was new to her.

"Why doesn't he come out after it himself?" she asked suddenly.

"He prefers to send others."

"Has he sent you?"

"She bent toward Jackson Janes as she put the question, and the eyes of the young couple met again."

"I am not Mark Talbot's spy," said he.

"But somebody sent you."

"Who told you so?"

"Aha! you must let us guess the truth in Blister City!" was the exclamation. "Beware! there is a prevailing belief that Monte was killed by a bonanza spy. You stand between two fates."

"What are they?"

"A permanent existence here or death."

"Is that true?"

"I thought you would divine it after my story of the code of the Sierras. They intend to force you into the Eternal League."

"When?"

"At any time almost."

Jackson Janes seemed driven to his feet by Meta's answer.

"Dare they do this?" he exclaimed.

"Dare?" echoed the girl, catching his eye.

"You would not talk thus if you knew the pards of Blister."

"Why did they parole me? You know the meaning of a parole, girl?"

"I do, but that was a subterfuge of the men into whose territory you have come."

"Impossible!"

"Truth was never truer."

Janes was dumfounded for a moment.

"Have you never wished to get away from here?" he asked.

"What if I have? You forget the code."

"Always the code!" he exclaimed bitterly, and then added:

"These men have no legal hold on you."

"I belong to the brotherhood."

"Is that all? Where did you come from?"

"I came to Blister one day with a party of three. Two of them joined the League—the other refused and was shot dead in his tracks. You see how the law works."

"It is infamous!" cried the youth.

"The pards of Blister City do not think it so," was the reply.

"They can't always hold their mountain fort, and carry out their peculiar laws against the world."

"They've succeeded for ten years."

"So long as that?" exclaimed Janes, astonished.

"Saturn says they will die of old age here."

"No danger of that," laughed the young stranger. "They will perish with their boots on long before then. When do you think they will try to press me into the League?"

"As I have said, they are liable to do it at any time."

"To-night?"

"They generally do that kind of work by day. There is time enough for you."

"Time enough for what?"

"To get away in—unless you want to become an oath-bound citizen of Blister."

"I did not come here for that."

"Of course not."

At that moment Jackson Janes looked out of the window, and the girl saw him start.

"Is that one of your people out there?" he asked, with a glance at her.

Meta walked across the floor and looked out.

"Another stranger!" he heard her exclaim, and the next moment she had turned upon him.

"Is he not one of your pards?" she said.

"That man? I have no pards," and the youth went to the door.

The person who had attracted him had just gone by, well-mounted on a perfect-limbed horse that carried his head high, and stirred little clouds of yellowish dust about his hocks.

He could see that the man was well-built, that his skin was quite tanned under his hat, and that he looked for all the world like the well-equipped men he had seen among the southern gold and silver-camps.

"I don't know him," he said to Meta, whose eyes were riveted on the new-comer, as if a spell held them there.

"Neither do I," was the reply, as the intense look continued. "I once saw a man like that ride into Blister, but it was in a dream. I saw him the second time. I would like to see them

try to force him into the League. No, I would not, either. There would be blood shed."

"Do you think he would resist?"
"Resist?" echoed Meta, pointing at the rider.
"Look at the way he carries himself in the saddle. There goes a cool head!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE FOXES OF BLISTER.

THE stranger who had entered Blister City when nobody was expected, rode toward the open door of the general resort of the populace, which was Old Resolute's saloon.

He was seen by half a dozen men on the inside some time before he came up, and to be noticed was to receive immediate attention.

The first figure to emerge from the place was the stalwart one of Trinidad Tom, and after him tramped Saturn and the others.

Trinidad's gaze wandered from the stranger's face to the boots thrust through the western stirrups, and rested there.

"How are you all, gentlemen?" said the new-comer, touching his hat. "Blister City, I believe?"

"You're right thar," answered Trinidad.
"I'm called Barnett Brooks at home and away from it."

"An' we ar' ther seraphs o' ther Sierras," and Trinidad showed his teeth in a grin as he waved his hand toward the crowd whose coming forth had stripped the saloon bare of customers.

The mounted man threw one leg over the saddle and quietly dismounted.

"What's the news?" he asked.

Already the stranger was being studied from many points of view. There were keen looks through long black lashes, and he waited calmly for a reply to his question.

"News?" smiled Trinidad Tom. "Do you think we'd have much, cooped up hyer among ther mountains? You ought ter be ther news-agent; we don't know any world beyond a sartin boundary."

"Bottled up, eh?" responded Brooks.

"That's the term. How's things at 'Frisco?"

It was apparent that Trinidad threw out this question as a feeler. It was a sly way of getting at the stranger's personality.

"I haven't seen 'Frisco for some time," was the reply. "You might have later news from there than I could impart."

The speaker leaned slightly against his horse while he spoke.

He towered above the shoulders of the animal, and took matters very easy with his hat set back on his head, displaying to advantage his peculiarly piercing eyes.

"You look kind o' dry, stranger," said Trinidad, at which the crowd laughed in spots, and the man at the horse threw a look toward Old Resolute's.

A moment later he was walking toward the trap respectfully elbowed by half a dozen toughs and eyed by all as keenly as ever.

What had brought him to Blister City?

"Do you know him?" whispered Saturn, touching Trinidad Tom's sleeve as they came together when the stranger had crossed the threshold of the mountain den.

"No."

"I think I do."

Trinidad looked quickly into the speaker's face.

"You don't want to make any mistake," said he.

"I hardly ever do."

"Well, who is that man?"

"He's a sleuth."

"A—what?" ejaculated Trinidad.

"A detective."

"That man?"

"Yes."

"By Jove! we want him just now, an' yet we don't."

Saturn shook his head.

"I don't like detectives," he responded.

"I believe that is true," smiled Trinidad Tom, giving his comrade a look which was understood.

"The most of us don't like 'em; but if by that one's aid we can find out finished Moccasin Monte, I'll tolerate him in Blister. But ar' you sart'in about his callin'?"

"Pretty sart'in, Trinidad."

"Is his name Brooks?"

"It warn't when I saw him last if he's the man I think he is."

"What was it, then?"

"Sunshine Sam."

"Whar did you see him?"

"In Deadwood."

"On a trail?"

"Yes, with the king of man-hunters, Captain Coldgrip."

Trinidad Tom caught his breath, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Let's go in," he replied, touching Saturn's arm, and the two pards of Blister City walked into the ranch.

"If he is Sunshine Sam an' a detective, something fetches him hyer," passed from Tom to Saturn as they crossed the step. "Recollect last night Monte got a knife for something he found among ther dead man's clothes. It may be a coincidence, Saturn, but—"

He said no more for they were inside.

The new-comer was found leaning against the counter gossiping with the motley set by whom he was confronted. Monte's funeral had led the Blister sports frequently to the bottle, and Brooks was quietly enduring a perfect rain of remarks and questions.

He was taking it all in the best of humor, too, and deep in his eyes appeared little flashes of merriment as he answered a question here and wittily turned a remark there.

It was a scene Blister City had not witnessed for many a day, yet, under the outward humor of the crowd lay a vein of seriousness which could be seen in some of the covert looks thrown at the visitor—claws under the velvet.

"That is the man—that is Captain Coldgrip's spy," said Saturn in a glance at Trinidad Tom when he had studied Brooks for a minute.

An instant later the boss of Blister City stood face to face with the man leaning against the bar.

"We'd like ter see you, Saturn an' I would," remarked Trinidad nodding toward the tough at his elbow.

"I'm at your service, gentlemen."

Barnett Brooks stepped forward, but turned and threw an eagle upon the counter.

"For the boys," he smiled, with a look over the crowd, and amid an applause evoked by his liberality, he came up to the two pards and announced that he was ready to accompany them.

Three finer looking men, physically, than the trio who walked down the street from Old Resolute's never left footprints in the dust of a wild camp.

Barnett Brooks walked between the two Sierra captains, his shoulders almost touching theirs, and his figure on an equal footing with their ample proportions.

Trinidad Tom and the stranger exchanged some remarks as the trip lengthened, but the former did not disclose his intentions, and Brooks threw out no clues to his business in Blister.

"Look!" exclaimed Meta, who still lingered in Jackson Jones's cabin. "The stranger walks between the lions of the Sierra. I don't know what that means."

The youthful pair drew back from the window and watched the three men pass.

They had now a good look at the stranger's face.

"I saw that man in 'Frisco; I am sure of it!" exclaimed the young man.

"When?"

"Shortly before I left."

"Where was he?"

"I cannot tell just now. Let me think. Was it in Golden Gate Park where I spent a part of the afternoon? Was it— But no! I can't place him, though his face is one I have seen before."

By this time the three men had passed, and Meta watched them from the door till they passed into Trinidad Tom's cabin.

She could follow them no further.

If she could have done so, she might have noticed that when the cabin door shut an iron bolt dropped noiselessly into a strong socket at the top of the portal.

Trinidad Tom was the first to turn on the stranger, and, with a swift glance at his comrade, he said:

"We've a lurkin' idea, Mr. 'Brooks, that you're the very man we need hyer just now."

The words seemed to astonish the man who heard them.

"I didn't know I was wanted here," he answered.

"You ar' if we've struck the right man an' I guess we have," continued Tom. "When some men see a face once they never forget it. It makes no difference where it crosses their path—whether among the mountains, or deep in the heart of a city like 'Frisco. You may be Mr. Barnett Brooks—we don't say that you ain't—mind you—but hyer stand two Californy gophers what'd bet their heads that you ar' Sunshine Sam, a detective."

Whether Trinidad Tom's preliminaries, or his countenance while he spoke had prepared the quiet listener for the ending, he did not manifest any surprise.

A peculiar smile came into being at his lips. He looked from man to man a second and then replied:

"Sunshine Sam, eh? A detective?"

"Yes," said both men at once.

"Well, gentlemen, you've made a center shot. I guess I'm the identical individual you've named."

Such a frank confession was more than the two pards expected.

It struck them with more force than a denial could have done.

Saturn nearly lost his breath.

"We thought so!" ejaculated Trinidad, triumphantly. "As I've lately said, you come ter Blister a little late, but may be in the nick of time. Perhaps, though, if you're on a trial now, you can't help us at the same time."

"I am always ready. In what way can I serve Blister City?"

Saturn threw up his hand as Trinidad was about to reply.

"In the first place," said he, "are you still Captain Coldgrip's man?"

"I am my own man."

"On a trail of your own?"

"Perhaps."

"Go ahead then," and Saturn nodded to Trinidad. "Give him the lay-out if you want to."

Trinidad Tom was cautious, but he had a story to tell and he told it well.

During the next five minutes Sunshine Sam listened to the story of Monte's death as Blister City knew it.

Trinidad told also about the footprint in the ground in the cabin—the strange sole with a row of nails across it.

"Thar it is," finished the narrator. "You kin put Blister under an everlasting debt by givin' it a clew to the hand what handled the knife in Monte's shanty. An' ther friendship o' the Eternal League might prove valuable in the future."

"The Eternal League?—what is the League?"

"All of us are of it. Nothing takes us beyond certain boundaries."

"Yes, one thing," said Saturn.

"What is that?"

"The trail of a traitor!"

"I accept," answered Trinidad.

"We are oath-bound and of one mind. Just now we want blood for blood—the hand of the assassin for the heart of his victim. Can you help us? Will you turn sleuth-bound for Blister City, or will you let Monte's murderer escape beyond our territory?"

"I did not come to you for work," said Sunshine Sam.

"Then we ask in vain."

"I have not said so."

Trinidad's look brightened, but Saturn's did not change.

"A man with a game. I see it!" muttered the last named. "If he is to play anything like the hands they say he played in Deadwood under Captain Coldgrip's eye, we don't want him on the ground of the Eternal League."

"Give us a clew," suddenly resumed Trinidad Tom. "If you can't take the trail for Blister, put us on to it."

"I will do that," was the prompt reply.

"When?"

"Before long."

"By to-morrow?"

"I cannot say."

"Within a week?"

"That is uncertain," and Sunshine Sam gave the two pards a smile.

"He wants time—time to play some cunning game of his own," growled Saturn under his breath. "My opinion is that the chip of the old block has made a mistake. I can make Blister City a steel-trap for him. By Jupiter! I'll do it!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE TIGER IN THE DARK.

CAPTAIN COLDGRIP'S pupil had come to a place where cunning and courage were likely to make large demands upon him.

When he walked out of the cabin after the interview just had the looks of Trinidad Tom and Saturn followed him until his figure vanished.

"That's one o' the kind I don't fancy," remarked Saturn as his hand crept across the table and rested on his comrade's arm. "He's a human ferret who is always givin' somebody a peck o' trouble. What is more, Trinidad, he's the same man what helped Captain Coldgrip through the great Deadwood case. You've heard o' that, eh?"

"I have. But you heard what he said about taking the trail for us?"

"Of course. Do we want him, though? If he is hyer to play a hand for himself, which I'll bet my head he is, couldn't we get along without im?"

Trinidad Tom did not reply for a moment.

"Let him go a little while, Saturn," he said at length. "Of course he did not come to No-Gold Land to find out who killed Monte—he was hyer before that event took place. You an' I ar' enough for him if his secret game should turn out to be ag'in' Blister. If he sets us on the trail of the dagger that finished the big-hearted pard, well an' good."

"If he trifles with us, what?"

"You ought to know," and the eyes of the two pards met.

Saturn drew back and smiled.

It was late on the afternoon of the same day when Meta saw approaching her house the man whose coming to Blister City had interested her.

She was to have a personal introduction to Sunshine Sam, and that was what she wanted.

"I did not expect to find a lady here," remarked the detective addressing the young girl who had welcomed him with a cordiality that seemed to delight him.

"My sex is everywhere," she answered.

"Everywhere to brighten the world. When did you come to Blister?"

"Long ago," was the rather indefinite response.

Sunshine Sam did not pursue his inquiries further in that direction.

"They tell me," he resumed, "that you had

an interview with Noland the man who was hanged the other day by the pards of this camp."

"I had."

"Where was he from?"

"He did not say."

"Nor tell you about his mission here?"

"No; he did not intend to stop here long."

"He was going on, then?"

"He was—to Frisco. Let me ask a question," and Meta's eyes got an expression that fixed Sam's attention.

"Go ahead, girl."

"Ain't you a detective?"

A smile came suddenly to the spotter's lips.

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"I think strange things sometimes," she replied.

"But you don't dream out facts, do you?"

"Not often."

"Well, I am what some men would call a detective."

"From Frisco?"

"Lately from there."

"Of course a trail of some kind brings you to No-Gold Land."

"You are right."

"I have a woman's curiosity, but I know you will not gratify it," smiled the girl. "I would like to know, but pshaw! why go on? I am foolish. Pardon me, sir," and she flushed to the temples rendering herself more beautiful than ever.

"They are both beautiful, the nabob's ward and the angel of the camp," thought Sunshine Sam. "This one is the fairest, and she has no business wasting her sweetness on the wild men by whom she is surrounded."

"What do you want to know?" he asked. "You think from what you've heard that detectives keep everything they know from other people."

"That is a natural thought for me. Did you come to Blister City to take the trail of the man who took Monte's life? There! you see how inquisitive I am."

"I was never interested in Monte."

"Ah! Then something else brought you to Blister."

"Something else, and Monte's death. Of course you knew the murdered sport?"

"Oh, yes."

"I am told that he believed in the existence of lost bonanzas in No-Gold Land."

"He did; but Monte was a queer man," added Meta.

"What was his theory?"

"Oh, he had several. His hobby was bonanza maps."

"I presume he had a good many?"

"A dozen at least."

"At his cabin?"

"Yes."

"Did the murderer take them away?"

"No."

"Are they there still?"

"They are."

"Would you direct me to them?"

"Are you looking for a lost mine?" suddenly cried Meta, leaning toward Sunshine Sam. "I think I begin to see your mission."

"Don't be too sure," laughed the detective.

"Yes, sir, I will send you to Monte's collection of maps," she went on. "You will not find them easy of solution. To me they are puzzles that really mean nothing. Monte was imposed on by men who knew his weakness. I am convinced that some of those diagrams were manufactured solely to sell to Monte. He bought all that were thrown on the market. And he paid prices that often impoverished him. When you go to Monte's cabin you will find a lamp fastened to the wall. Take it down and you will discover a square block neatly fitted into the log. There is Monte's treasury; there are the maps."

"Thanks," said Sunshine Sam, glancing out of the window to notice that the cabins across the street were no longer distinguishable for the shadows which heralded another night.

"I'm a map-peddler myself," continued Meta.

"You, girl?"

"Yes, I guess I caught the infection from Monte."

The angel of the Sierra laughed lightly as she turned away, and ran her shapely hands underneath the pillow of a little bed in one corner.

When she came back she carried a small box, which she opened on the table before Sunshine Sam's eyes.

"I have three to Monte's dozen," she went on. "One would not think it, but bonanza plots are thick in No-Gold Land. Here are mine."

And she placed three pieces of paper before the sleuth, who bent eagerly forward and examined them.

Meta looked on with a faint smile.

"Are these your puzzles?" asked Sam, looking up.

"Yes. What do you think of them?"

The detective slowly shook his head.

"I trust they did not cost you much," said he.

"Not a great deal."

"This one," he continued, laying his finger on one of the diagrams. "This map is a patent

fraud. It is the plot of an old mine near Dead-wood."

"Ah!" exclaimed Meta. "Well, it was given to me."

"The other two, I fear, are equally worthless."

"I am not surprised," laughed the girl. "I think you will find Monte's maps to be just like these."

"He had a dozen, you say?"

"A dozen."

The following moment the girl had returned the three diagrams, or charts, to the little box, which Sunshine Sam saw her replace beneath the pillow.

"Are you going to try to avenge Blister?" asked Meta.

"In what way?"

"By running down Monte's murderer."

"I did not come here for that purpose."

"But they want you to take the trail. Saturn—"

The girl stopped, and let the sentence go.

"Who is Saturn?" asked Sam.

"He is my friend."

"And a good friend, eh, girl?"

"He is a queer fellow—a man with singular ideas. I can't help liking Saturn. You have met him, I believe?"

"I have."

"Don't you think him a strange man?"

"I did not give him much thought," was the reply.

"You will if you stay here long; he will force you to do so."

Sunshine Sam found himself on the street, a few moments after Meta's last answer.

"I think, too, that Saturn will force me to notice him," he murmured. "I see that I am to have a checkmate, if he carries out the plans now in his head. Charts, charts, charts! I find them all along the trail; they began in Frisco—in Mark Talbot's palace—and here one counts them by the dozen. I did not get the one the Indian had, and those the girl just showed me are of no account. Will the secret treasury in Monte's cabin do me any good?"

The detective did not move on the dead man's domicile with undue haste.

An hour passed before he went toward it, and then he advanced with a good deal of caution.

Sunshine Sam found the door unlocked.

It yielded readily when he pressed the latch and in a moment he stood in Monte's shanty.

"The lamp is set against the wall, she said," he exclaimed. "My hands must have eyes for me this time." And he began to feel his way around the wall to his right.

It was not altogether dark in Monte's cabin. An arrow of moonlight coming in at the window fell across the table and that was all.

It did not show the secret sleuth a particle of any of the cabin walls, and as he had said, he would have to trust to his hands.

He went around the cabin in the dark, feeling high and low for the lamp.

"It must be somewhere," he ejaculated puzzled by his poor success. "I forgot to inquire after its exact position; but I will find it if it is here."

The next second a cry escaped him, and he halted in the dark like a man who makes a startling discovery.

Sunshine Sam had made one.

His trailing hand had found a square hole in the wall, and, what was more, it was empty!

"What does this mean? Who has been here ahead of me?" thought the detective. "What other person knew the secret of Monte's treasury?" and in order to convince himself that he had made no mistake, he thrust his hand again into the opening, only to find it entirely empty.

"Where is the lamp?" suddenly cried Sam. "The thief surely had time to replace it, yet he did not. I'll strike a match and see."

The New York sleuth thrust his fingers into a pocket and had touched his matches, when a pair of hands caught him in the darkness, and he went against the wall in a twinkling!

"Heavens!" thought Sam. "The plunderer was just ahead of me." And then he was jerked from the logs and hustled toward the door without ceremony and not a sound.

All at once the detective struck the table which tottered and went over, and before either man could recover, both went down, Sam as ill luck would have it, underneath.

He was in no position to grapple with the wiry and powerful antagonist who was on top. He was wedged in between the legs of the stand which prevented him from using his arms, while the hands of his foe were at his throat, and his knees on his chest.

It had been the work of a second, and Sunshine Sam was in a perilous place.

A moment elapsed after the fall ere the detective recovered.

When he looked up he saw that the streak of moonlight which had stretched across the table now revealed the head and shoulders of the tiger that had sprung in the dark.

It took him no time at all to recognize his enemy.

He had again encountered the nabob's spy, Red Cloud the Klamath!

CHAPTER XIII.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

SUNSHINE SAM now knew why the lamp was missing from its place on the cabin wall.

The red athlete who was holding him between the legs of the table had come back for Monte's gold maps and they were doubtless in his possession at that time.

There was a blazing look of triumph in the Indian's eyes.

"White spy come a long ways for nothing!" Red Cloud cried. "Does he not wish he had never scented the trail that leads to No-Gold Land?"

"I regret nothing," answered Sam.

"No? He found nothing in the hole in Monte's wall."

"That is true. I found it empty because your hand had been there, Red Cloud."

"Beware of Red Cloud's hand!" exclaimed the Indian.

"Is it so dangerous as all that?"

"It is dangerous, white man."

"You forget that other hands exist."

A fearless and derisive smile appeared at the corners of the Indian's mouth.

Before it vanished, Sam felt the grip that held him down suddenly relax, and the next moment he was not held at all.

This astonished him.

Red Cloud drew back through the streak of moonlight, and the detective lost no time in getting upon his feet.

"Red Cloud wants to give the white trail dog another chance," said the red-skin's voice.

"Maybe you had better not," was the reply.

"Red Cloud likes to have a foe."

"You may find me that in all that the name implies."

"So be it, white man. If the Frisco fox wants to follow Red Cloud, let him look out. But if he would prolong his life, let him take the trail that leads back to the nabob's city."

The sleuth's answer was silence.

He saw the figure of the Klamath advance to the door, and the next second his form was darkly outlined against the stars.

"You want these, pale-face; they are yours," said his voice, and a lot of papers fell at Sam's feet.

"Beware of Red Cloud the Klamath! He goes not back without the secret which he hunts in the goldless hills. His eye is sure and his hand is strong. Let the white man remember!"

Sunshine Sam found himself alone in the cabin—alone in the narrow space, while the Indian walked away with the step and eye of a victor.

"By Jupiter! he left me something!" exclaimed Captain Coldgrip's pupil as he gathered together the papers that had fluttered about his feet. "Does he believe these documents to be valueless? They are the gold charts Meta told me about, the ones Monte purchased wherever he found them. If they are worth a straw, Red Cloud would not have thrown them at me. What do they consist of, anyhow?"

Sam found the missing lamp with little exertion and righting the table he soon had the charts before him.

They were roughly drawn and some were old and torn, puzzles all to any one not used to deciphering such things.

The detective went through them rapidly.

"Hello! there are but eleven here. The girl said Monte had a dozen bonanza charts!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Did Red Cloud find one to his liking and carry it off?"

Sam searched the cabin for the missing chart, but success did not reward him and he was forced to go back to the others somewhat disappointed.

Meta might have thought there were a dozen," said he. "The girl is liable to be mistaken, though the Indian may have found a chart to which he attaches some importance. I do not forget the scene in Frisco—the oath-bound compact in Mark Talbot's house. Red Cloud still heads the Silent Six; for the beautiful Medora he is to find the lost bonanza—to give up its key to the California nabob. And I have said that that fascinating girl shall never be turned over to the red-skin."

Sunshine Sam did not see a human face draw back from the window when he bunched the worthless charts and turned with them to the hole in the wall.

"What did I tell Trinidad?" came out from behind the teeth of the man outside. "Sunshine Sam is here on a game of his own. He has invaded our dominions to play a hand intended to enrich somebody not himself. He's had an interview with the Seraph of Blister City—with Meta herself. I don't like it. He'll put something in the girl's head if he gets a chance. By the eternal gods! I allow no man to do that!"

The speaker drew back until he was not visible when Sunshine Sam came out of Monte's cabin, but a pair of keen eyes followed the detective when he moved off.

"Let him go. I want to tell Meta what's what," said the camp spy, turning away. "The girl likes me, and I—I think something of her."

Three minutes had not elapsed ere Meta of Blister found herself face to face with a man who had opened her door with the air of a privileged person.

The man took a stool without an invitation, and looked steadily at the girl for a moment.

Meta was puzzled.

"What fetched him hyer, Meta?" he suddenly asked.

"Whom do you mean, Saturn?" asked Meta, in return.

"Come! don't play the innocent dodge!" laughed the bronzed lieutenant of the Eternal League. "You know better than that, don't you, girl? Whom do I mean, eh? Thar's only one man I'm talking about now?"

"The young one?"

"Jackson Janes? Fudge! I'm after the other—the bonanza detective who left this shanty not long ago. What fetched him hyer, I asked, Meta?"

"What do you think, Saturn?"

A frown settled on the face of the Blister sport.

"What brings all strangers into No-Gold Land?" he exclaimed. "It brought him hyer, girl."

"Do you think so?"

"I do, an' you know it. Look me in the eye, Meta," and Saturn's hand darted suddenly forward and caught the girl's wrist. "Give me straight goods, for you know I want no other kind. He's a bonanza-hunter, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You see I don't miss the mark, girl. He is Sunshine Sam, a man what made a reputation in the Black Hills as the spy of a boss sleuth called Captain Coldgrip. Down at Old Resolute's he passed for Barnett Brooks, but the disguise wasn't thick enough ter fool me. Trinidad Tom wants to put him on the trail of Monte's assassin, but he will play out his own hand before he touches that case. Meta, didn't he ask you a good many questions?"

"He asked me some," admitted the girl.

"War they about hidden bonanzas an' such things?"

"He touched such subjects."

"I thought so!" cried Saturn. "We don't want him hyer. We can't force him into the League, an', by Jupiter! I don't want him thar. Meta?"

"Well?"

Saturn got up and fastened his eyes on the young girl.

"You don't want to be too communicative with this paid spy of some 'Frisco gold-bug," said he. "Keep clear of him; but thank Heaven! he won't be hyer long. I guess there ar' traps in No-Gold Land capable o' catching the slyest fox that ever struck a scent."

"What do you mean?" cried Meta.

"Wait an' see, girl," answered Saturn, with a laugh. "All you have to do is to keep clear of this man, an' I guess of the other one, too."

"The other one?" echoed Meta.

"The young one who nearly stretched mountain rope for the death of Monte. Confound it! it wouldn't have been much out o' the way to have hoisted him on general principles. We've got enough hyer now; but yet they're goin' ter take another in."

"Into the League?"

"Yes."

"Who is the chosen person?"

"The young gold-hunter."

"Jackson Janes?"

"That is the man."

"When is the ceremony to take place?"

"Between now and daylight."

The girl started.

"I thought—"

She checked herself as if she thought she had been displaying too much interest in Jackson Janes's case.

"You thought we usually take 'em in in the daytime, eh?" exclaimed Saturn.

"You generally do."

"Yes, but the boys want this ceremony performed at night. They seem ter be afraid that the victim will escape. I wish he would. No! I wish he would refuse ter take the oath. I don't want to 'brother' him."

There was intense malignity in Saturn's look as his tongue pronounced the last words.

"Meta, remember! Keep clear of the bonanza-hunters. We have two of them in Blister to-night, or at least there war awhile ago. Thar's no bonanza for them; but thar is *something* else."

Before the girl could reply to significant words like these, Saturn went out, and she was alone once more.

"He thinks he speaks mysteriously, but I have studied Saturn long enough to read him like a book," she exclaimed. "His 'something else' means a great deal. So they are to take Jackson Janes into the League to-night? He has intimated that he will resist—that he will defy the camp rather than take the oath that binds one to live here all his life. To resist the oath means death, swift and terrible, from the merciless revolvers of the cool men of No-Gold Land. No more blood shall be shed in Blister City if I

can prevent it. I know the code. I know its requirements and its penalties; but, God helping me, I cannot see the innocent suffer at the hands of the heartless."

The angel of the Sierras went to the door and looked out.

The coast was clear.

Some distance down the camp street she heard the boisterous laugh of a lot of toughs who were Old Resolute's nightly customers.

"They are there yet," thought the girl. "If they are to perform the ceremony to-night, they will soon go at it. I have time enough to sound the warning. He must go away unless he wants to become a citizen of Blister, and I know he loves freedom too well for that."

She shut the door noiselessly behind her and crept away.

Down the mountain avenue in the dense shadows of the cabins she glided like a ghost.

In a little while she stood at the door of Jackson Janes's cabin.

"Hyer, Meta, none o' this!" suddenly hissed a voice at her elbow, and the hand that closed like a vise at her wrist dragged her away from the door.

The voice seemed to take the girl's breath, and the sudden clutch to deprive her of the power of speech.

She stared at her captor in bewilderment.

"You forget," he continued, "that you belong to the Eternal League, an' that one of its laws visits death upon a member who warns a person not a brother! You war goin' to warn the man in the shanty; you want him to get away."

"Don't you desire the same?" she replied.

"You say you never want to call him brother."

"By Jupiter! I don't! He will refuse to join the League—he will resist. Don't you see, girl?"

"And they will shoot him down like a dog!"

"Yes, yes," and Meta drew back and looked horrified at Saturn, while he laughed in her face.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WHITE CAPS.

THE girl's wrist was not freed until one of her captor's hands had open the door of her cabin, and she had been pushed across the threshold.

"Don't try it again; don't!" admonished Saturn with a look which was not hard to interpret, and then, before the startled Angel of Blister City could recover her voice, he turned and was gone.

"She's a queer one, an' she needs a little reining in," muttered the Sierra tough. "She war goin' to warn the young cuss; that's just what it meant, an' I came up in the nick o' time. She knows that he won't take the iron-clad oath of the League, an' she wanted to give him time to get away. Who is he? He's a young gold-hunter who came from 'Frisco on hunt of the old mine said to exist somewhar hyer. The chances ar' that he is the Californy nabob's spy, an' that he knows more about Monte's death than he wants ter tell. But I don't want him hyer. He's too nigh Meta's age, an' then he's good-lookin'; too devilishly so to my notion."

Meta stood silent and irresolute in the little apartment she called home.

"Saturn is against him," she thought, and the sentence almost formed audibly on her lips. "What makes him hate the young man so? Have they met before, and where? I can see why he should hate Sunshine Sam, for he is called a detective, and Saturn has had experiences with those people. But he hates Jackson Janes just as much. He knows the youth will refuse to join the League. Maybe he originated the plan to admit him to membership to-night. Saturn is a cool one; he can be as cruel as the grave when he exerts himself."

The girl could hardly hold herself back while Saturn walked from the house with victory in his dark eyes.

She saw the net that was being quickly thrown about the young man from 'Frisco.

Each moment increased his peril.

She could imagine him sleeping while the toughs of Blister City were laughing over the scheme that would put an end to his existence.

Of course he would not take the iron-clad oath of the mountain League.

There was too much of the eagle in his nature. He had not come to No-Gold Land to confine himself for life within a boundary, and to take for his companions a lot of men as wild as their domain and as savage as the bear of the Sierras.

Such a person Jackson Janes was not.

Meta knew this. She had attempted to warn the prisoner of the camp, but the stern hand of Saturn had interrupted her warning.

Dared she try again?

For some time after the rough's departure the young girl stood alone in her house hearing no sound from without and seeing nothing but her shadow on the wall.

She wondered if Saturn had gone to the men who comprised the League, most of whom at that moment were inmates of Old Resolute's bar.

He might have gone back to the youth's quar-

ters to watch them until the League should come after its victim.

Meta had forgotten Sunshine Sam.

If she had followed Saturn she would have seen him open the door of a cabin some distance from the bar-room, and surprise a man at a table. This person was Trinidad Tom, the acknowledged captain of the Eternal League.

Saturn came toward Trinidad with a curious expression on his yellowish face.

"I've found something," he said, resting one hand on the corner of the table as he bent his body forward.

"No foolishness, Saturn," returned Tom.

"I'm givin' you none. The marked boot has been in camp again."

Trinidad Tom gave a quick start.

"You don't tell me that?" he cried.

"I tell you nothin' else."

"Where is it?"

"In the earth, with every nail thar just as we found 'em in Monte's cabin."

"Gods! Show me the track. Thar must be more than one, and it won't take very many to make a trail. Mebbe we won't need the services of Sunshine Sam after all."

Trinidad Tom left his seat, but Saturn gently pushed him back.

"Don't rush things. We've got another job on our hands first," said he.

"Another job? What is that?"

"We're goin' to make the young 'Frisco sport a citizen of Blister."

"We are? Who said so?"

"The boys have agreed to it."

"I haven't given my consent yet."

"But you will, seein' how the affair is liable ter turn out," and Saturn laughed. "Of course you'll agree ter the scheme. It's the easiest way out o' it, Trinidad."

"He won't join."

"Of course not. What does the code say on that subject?"

The eyes of the two captains met.

"You are a shrewd one, Saturn," replied Trinidad Tom. "I'd rather see the footprint than try the young man's grit."

"It won't fade out," was the quick response.

"I'll take you to it after the ordeal."

"The ordeal then," cried the Captain of Blister City. "Whar are the boys?"

"At Resolute's, the most of them."

"To Resolute's, then!"

The two pards walked out of the cabin together.

"Whar's the other man?" abruptly asked Trinidad.

"Which one?"

"The sleuth."

"Prowlin' round somewhar, likely. I hate all his kind."

"You've told me that before."

"I'm going to set a trap for him."

Tom looked at his companion, but made no reply.

"Did you hear me, Captain Trinidad?" exclaimed Saturn.

"I did."

"I mean what I say. I intend ter set a trap for Sunshine Sam. It'll be no reed trap, either."

"Be careful," smiled Trinidad Tom. "You forget that this man has played sleuth on both sides of the continent."

"He has never played a game out in No-Gold Land!" cried Saturn, and leaning toward his companion he added in a meanful whisper: "And my head for it, Trinidad, he never will!"

"Still I say, beware!" And shutting his lips firmly behind the last word, the Captain of the League marched straight ahead toward Old Resolute's.

The arrival of the two pards was the signal for a shout on the part of the inmates of the Sierra bar, and Saturn smiled when he heard the subject nearest his heart broached by half a dozen in chorus.

It was proposed to take Jackson Janes into the Eternal League and bind him by an oath to its strange code.

"We don't know how soon we may need him," said one of the men. "Men who wield deadly knives are finding us out, and the youngster has a cool hand and a steady eye. Look how he held the six-shooters in our faces when we were goin' to hold him accountable for Monte's murder. He never quailed. The man is grit in boots—the very kind we want in Monte's place."

"He might refuse to join," suggested Trinidad Tom.

"He's a man like the rest of us," was the quick response.

"He'll choose the League when we put the case fairly before him. A young man like him is no fool."

"But," pressed Trinidad, "but he *might* refuse. What then?"

"You know the code," was the answer.

"Very well. We'll try the new-comer, but when shall it be?"

"Now!"

A dozen men gave utterance to the reply at once.

"Don't put 'em off," whispered Saturn. "The sooner we get through with this job the sooner will we see the tell-tale footprint."

Spurred on by this covert suggestion, Trini-

dad Tom gave the desired command, and the men of Blister City received it with expressions of satisfaction.

"I'd like to know what has become of the detective," remarked Trinidad Tom to Saturn when the pards had scattered to their cabins to return in a few seconds as the Eternal League of the Sierra.

"Why anxious about him now?" asked Saturn.

"I'd like to have him under my eye during the proceedings."

"Do you think a link unites the two men?"

"Not quite that. One came here a short time in advance of the other. It is a coincidence."

"Nothing more, Captain Trinidad?"

Saturn looked his companion squarely in the eye while he spoke.

"Nothing more, I assure you, Saturn. I say again that I would like to have Sunshine Sam in sight."

"He may be on the trail of Monte's assassin," smiled Meta's friend. "You remember that you put the case into his hands."

"So I did."

"But you must not expect him to serve you as he serves Captain Coldgrip, his old master. Captain Trinidad, this detective didn't come to No-Gold Land to serve us."

"I believe it."

"He is here for gold; he is the spy of some one—you ought to guess whom."

Trinidad Tom could not reply before a man entered the bar-room.

This person wore a white cap and mask, the latter concealing his whole face.

The upper half of his body was covered with a coat of the same color, and on the breast were two crossed daggers in black, roughly-shaped, but effective.

During the next three minutes several more figures, similarly clad, made their appearance, each one as he came in saluting the two captains of the camp.

These were the men of the Eternal League in regalia; they were the oath-bound inhabitants of No-Gold Land—the men sworn to live and die in the heart of the everlasting Sierras.

Man succeeded man until more than a score stood before Old Resolute's bar.

"They're all hyer," said Saturn. "We can't afford to give the bird in the cage too much time when the door is open."

Trinidad Tom turned quickly at the words.

A moment later the bar-room of the mountain resort was deserted, and a line of white masks went down the camp's thoroughfare toward the western end.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, without a word, and no noise of grinding heels.

It was a ghostly and ominous procession in the weird light of a moon that hung far overhead in a cold expanse of sky.

"I guess I've got him," murmured Saturn, while he advanced at the head of the League, his elbow touching Captain Tom's amid the silence of that nocturnal tramp. "Meta won't try to warn him the second time, for she understood the look I gave her as I turned away. The girl is no fool if she does show herself to be a woman sometimes."

On, on went the band.

"We are hyer," said Saturn to Trinidad in a low whisper, and the lifting of the captain's finger halted the twenty stalwarts in the road.

Trinidad Tom advanced toward the cabin directly in his front, and rapped on the door with his big knuckles.

"Is he gone?" thought Saturn.

No! all at once the door was opened by some one on the inside, and Saturn started when he saw the surprised face of Jackson Janes.

"Now, more than ever, we've got him!" exclaimed Saturn. "In less than thirty minutes Monte will have a companion on the mountain."

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CODE.

THE White Caps of Blister City had not advanced unobserved to the cabin occupied by the young man known as Jackson Janes.

They had been seen by Meta, and when Trinidad Tom rapped on the shanty door the girl was near enough to see them all.

If she had been permitted to warn the victim, he would not now be in their clutches. She almost hated Saturn for his interference.

But it was too late now; the men of the Eternal League confronted the youth from 'Frisco.

Jackson Janes was surprised by the visit, but in a second he realized its import, and with a quiet smile at his lips, asked Trinidad Tom what was wanted.

The Captain of the League threw a swift look toward the stalwart masks at his back.

"This is the Eternal League of No-Gold Land," said he. "It has sought you out to make you a brother. Blister needs another good citizen in place of Monte the murdered."

Jackson Janes looked at the motionless figures.

"I did not come to Blister City to become a permanent citizen," he replied.

"May be not, but the League wants you."

"What is the League?"

"It is a brotherhood of men who are banded

together for purposes of self-protection and mutual love. We have a code as unalterable as the famous law of the Medes and Persians. The mountains are our home. We are never to cross a certain boundary line. We have buried ourselves from the outskirts of the world; the Sierras are the living tomb of the Eternal League."

"Will nothing take you beyond the boundary?" asked the young man.

"Yes, one thing will—the trail of a traitor," answered Trinidad.

"We have never had to cross the line on that account, though," he added. "We are at liberty to increase our numbers, but we do not invite recruits. They come to us from the world outside, just as you have come from 'Frisco or elsewhere. Every citizen belongs to the League. We let no visitor slip through our fingers. Now, you know why we stand before you."

The man from 'Frisco made no reply for a moment.

He thought he saw the masked men bend their bodies slightly forward, and if he had looked closely he would have caught a strange, wild gleam in Saturn's eyes.

"When do you want my answer?" he suddenly asked.

"Now!"

The youth's figure appeared to increase in stature.

"Gentlemen of the Eternal League, I regret that I cannot join the brotherhood," he said.

His reply drew a slight cry from the throat of a fair spectator who stood a few feet away in the shadow of a cabin.

"That is his death-warrant!" exclaimed Meta.

"Jackson Janes might have put the White Caps off and got a breathing-spell; but instead he has seen fit to pronounce his own doom."

"Is that your decision?" asked Trinidad Tom, looking straight into the youth's face.

"I can give you no other."

"You are at liberty to reconsider. We don't like to have any one refuse to accept the offer of brotherhood."

"I cannot help that. I must not pen myself up in the mountains during the term of my natural life."

Trinidad showed his disappointment in his looks, but Saturn's face exhibited its owner's secret glee.

"As you utterly refuse, I must acquaint you with the penalty," continued Captain Trinidad.

"What is that?"

"It is death."

If the young Californian intended to resist, he was not permitted to do so, for with the sound of Trinidad's last word, the foremost White Caps darted forward, and he was in their clutch.

The seizure was so sudden that the victim was taken by surprise, although Trinidad's reply might have prepared him for something of the sort.

He was firmly held by the hands of the League, and nothing remained for Trinidad Tom to do but to pronounce his doom.

"I shall not see it done!" cried Meta, who knew only too well the merciless character of the pards of the Sierras as well as the cruel code of laws they followed. "My hand would be powerless among them, and I would plead in vain for the young man's life. God help him now for he is in the grip of the Eternal League."

The girl turned away and hurried back to the cabin she had left for the purpose of witnessing the success of the camp brotherhood.

She knew what had followed refusals similar to the one given by Jackson Janes, and she did not want to be an eye-witness of the horrible proceedings.

Reaching her cabin home, she shut the door and threw herself upon the cot with her face buried in her hands. There she waited for a sound which did not come.

After a while she fell into a sleep, which was not broken for some time.

When she awoke she found ajar the door she had shut with care, and a cool air filled the room.

"It is all over now. I have slept a long while!" exclaimed Meta, springing up. "Jackson Janes has followed the last man before him who refused to join the League. Why does not Saturn come? I thought he would have been here with victory in his eye. He knew the Californian would refuse to join the brotherhood. He wanted him to refuse. Now, will they attempt to force the detective into the League? That effort might fail, and, if I have placed a proper estimate on the man, it might prove a costly one."

A moment later Meta distinctly heard a footstep at the door, and the following second she stood face to face with Saturn.

The evil genius of Blister City came forward with a singular expression of countenance that puzzled Meta.

Saturn was both pleased and disappointed.

"Well, girl, the young fellow wanted to play eagle, just as I thought," he observed, as he folded his arms and leaned against the table.

"You tried to initiate him, then?"

"Of course."

"And he refused to join the League?"

"He refused."

Meta came toward the bronzed sport with her eyes riveted upon him.

"Verily, the code of the Eternal League is merciless," said she.

"It must be so," was the prompt reply. "We can't afford to let one go and carry out the law on another. That wouldn't be fair."

"Is the code just, Saturn?"

"As just as we can make it, girl."

"Why does it exist at all?"

"Heavens! we had to have something to bind us together!" cried Saturn. "The sterner the code, the more durable the brotherhood, you see."

Meta looked at him again.

"You carried out the law on Jackson Janes, did you?" she asked.

"What else could we do? He refused to join the League. The code prescribes the penalty. Meta, this is no child's law. Men made it, and men carry it out. But I am hyer to show you something. It is outside the shanty."

The girl was seen to hesitate.

"Come! It isn't the work of the Eternal League," laughed Saturn. "It has no work to show you."

A few moments later Saturn and the Angel of Blister City were going down the street, the shapely hand of the girl in the palm of the Sierra tough.

There was a look of wonderment on Meta's face.

"Hyer we are," said Saturn halting alongside the end of a shanty, and turning with a smile to his companion. "You can't see it very well without a light, so I've got to strike a match."

His words were followed by the flash of a lucifer, and leading Meta forward, he held the flame near the ground and bade her look.

At first the girl saw nothing, but the finger of Saturn directed her gaze to a footprint plainly discernible in the earth.

"Look at it," he said. "Do you see the nails across the sole?"

"I see them," answered Meta with a glance at the sport.

"Do you know who made that track?"

"I do not."

"The man who killed Monte!"

The seraph of the Sierras drew back with a light cry.

"I thought it would give you a start," smiled Saturn.

"Did you bring me here to show me this track?"

"Yes."

"I never saw it before."

"Maybe not. You see how peculiar the nails cross the sole. There's not another sole like it in Californy. The man who catches Monte's assassin must follow that track. It was made since the big-hearted sport got the dagger in his heart. Meta, the slayer has come back to Blister. He may be hyer now."

"Do you think so?"

"That track wasn't there an hour before sundown," persisted Saturn. "What fetches the murderer back?—another victim?"

The girl did not speak.

"See hyer, Meta," and Saturn straightened and looked at Meta. "You're mixed up in this affair somehow."

"Me?" cried the girl. "In what affair, Saturn?"

"I say you're a part of the game. I don't mean that you know anything about Monte's death, for I believe you don't. But what brought the youngster to No-Gold Land if it wasn't a pretty face? The other one—the detective, Sunshine Sam—is on the trail of a bonanza; but Jackson Janes was looking for something else. By heavens! I know it, girl."

"Did he tell you?"

"No. I found out."

"After the League had dealt with him?"

"Yes."

"He never intimated anything of the kind to me," answered Meta calmly. "My impression was, I recollect, that he was on a gold trail—that a bonanza legend fetched him to No-Gold Land. If you know better, however—"

"I do!" interrupted Saturn. "But it is over now and the hunt has ended."

"But why did you say that I was mixed up in the affair?"

"Did I say so?" asked the sport with a start.

"You have a short memory, Saturn."

"I want no longer. Let us get back, Meta. You have seen the footprint. We are going to begin the trail here."

"We?" echoed the girl.

"Yes. We intend to follow the assassin of Moccasin Monte to the end of the world if necessary."

"Beyond the boundaries prescribed in the code?"

"Yes."

"It says that nothing but the trail of the traitor shall take the League across the line."

"We'll amend the code so as to take in assassins."

"That will do," smiled Meta.

But little was said between the mysterious foot-track and the girl's cabin, and when Saturn

bade the girl good-night, she stood in the center of the room like a person in a spell.

"What does it all mean?" she exclaimed. "He let some things slip out unintentionally awhile ago. He did not want to say that I was mixed up in the singular events that have just occurred, but he could not check himself. Mixed up in them am I? In what way? If no gold-mine lured Jackson Jones to his fate, what did?"

Meta had only an echo for reply.

All at once the door opened in her face and as she started forward, she saw the figure of the man she was just then thinking about.

"I've come to say good-by. I'm going away for a spell," said a voice. "I guess I'll come out of this game on top. I generally do. Good-night, Meta."

The speaker turned round as he finished, and the astonished girl saw moving away the broad shoulders and well-poised head of Sunshine Sam.

She sprang forward with a cry intended to stop him; but he was gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ORDERS FROM 'FRISCO.

"WHAT did Red Cloud promise Merle, his brother? Look!"

"Great heavens! You have found it at last!"

"Red Cloud is on the last mile of the gold trail."

It was the morning after the last events in Blister City, and Red Cloud, the Indian trailer, stood before a handsome white man with flowing black hair, and brilliant eyes.

The spot was a lonely one in the mountains, where shadows still lay thickly, although it was day, and behind the stately half-naked figure of the Klamath rose a mass of perpendicular gray rock.

A short distance beyond this scene five men were cooking an early meal, but they were beyond earshot and the well-filled tones of the Indian—Mark Talbot's guide—died away without reaching their ears.

Merle, the long-haired sport and leader of the nabob's Silent Six, could hardly credit the red-skin's revelation.

Red Cloud seemed to believe that he had been doubted.

When he addressed Captain Merle, he held out a paper which bore marks of age; but all at once he dived one of his red hands below his belt, and produced a bit of reddish stone as he turned to the rocky wall.

During the next few moments the white man watched his flying hand as it drew a rude chart on the stone.

"What says Merle, my brother, now?" demanded Red Cloud, wheeling upon the white man. "Does he look at the talking lines on the stone and doubt still?"

"Is that the chart of the big bonanza, chief?"

"Red Cloud's chalk has spoken. Did not the Klamath say that before two suns had set, he would lead the nabob's men to the prize? Look, Captain Merle. The last sun is just rising."

"Red Cloud, you are the best trump in the deck!" cried the sport.

The faintest of smiles appeared at the corners of the Indian's mouth. He knew the flattery of the white man.

"When did you find the real trail?" continued Merle—Merle Monterey was his somewhat Mexicanish name, in full.

"When my brothers slept, Red Cloud's eyes were wide awake," was the answer.

"Are we near the treasure?"

"Nearer than you think."

The white captain's eyes brightened with anticipation.

"We can't lay our hands on it too soon, Red Cloud," said he. "Long before this Mark Talbot has grown impatient. We left 'Frisco three months ago, promising, as you know, to find the lost mine inside of six weeks. I have told you my fears. The California nabob may send others out on the trail."

"Let him break his word with Red Cloud if he dare!" And the Indian's eyes seemed to catch fire. "The chief of the Klamaths will keep his part of the contract; Mark Talbot, the gold king, must keep his to the letter."

"Of course; but he must have grown impatient over our absence."

"He must wait."

The next moment Red Cloud erased the red marks from the rock with his hand, and then threw his hat on the ground a few feet away.

Merle Monterey watched him with much apparent curiosity.

He saw the red-skin draw a long-bladed knife and catch it dextrously at the point.

"His old pastime," murmured Merle, as the knife was thrown twenty feet into the air.

He watched it turn gracefully at its highest altitude and come down, point foremost, to penetrate the top of the hat and pin it to the ground.

Proud of this feat, Red Cloud turned upon his companion with a flashing eye, and then picked up the knife and returned it to his belt.

"Well done!" cried Merle.

"Red Cloud can do better than that. Let Merle place his hand on the hat."

"No, thank you," replied the sport, with a laugh. "The piercing of the hat satisfies me."

"Some day Merle shall see Red Cloud play with better game than his hat." And there was in Red Cloud's eyes a look which the captain of the Silent Six was to remember before many suns had set.

"Red Cloud, what are you going to get for all this?" asked Merle. "It may be none of my business, but I have often thought of it. You have promised to find the lost bonanza for Colonel Talbot."

"Red Cloud has promised."

"Of course your reward was mentioned in the compact?"

"It was, white brother."

"I have heard you say that you never wanted to measure riches as we whites measure them."

"Ah! Red Cloud has said that often. He does not want the yellow money the pale-faces dig from the mountains to hide in their banks. Red Cloud can put his hand on bonanzas any time."

"Now you puzzle me," exclaimed Merle, looking straight into the Indian's face. "I know you have not embarked on this quest for nothing. Mark Talbot is to pay you for your services."

"He pays me well!" was the answer.

"Ha! I thought so."

"And he is to pay Merle, my brother, for following Red Cloud to the treasure?"

"Certainly. We like adventure, chief, but we like money also."

"Well, Talbot will soon pay his white trailers off. He will pay us all."

"Good! This news will still the murmurs I've been hearing in camp."

"Would Merle, my brother, like to know what is to be Red Cloud's reward when he has led the white hunter to the door of the lost mine?"

"I leave that to you. Your compact with Mark Talbot is a private one, and you are under no obligations to me to divulge it here."

"That is true, Merle. Nobody heard the compact. The only witness was the holy book the white men worship, and it was a silent one. Talbot is to pay Red Cloud in coin more valuable than the gold he loves. The Indian is to take the best treasure of his house."

The Klamath's eyes fairly snapped under these utterances.

"That is enough, Red Cloud," said Captain Merle. "I don't want to pry into your secret. Keep it till we get back to 'Frisco. Then I may see the reward paid, and it will be a secret no longer."

"It shall be done."

"Is it possible that I have got at the secret of the compact?" thought Merle Monterey, when, half an hour after the interview, he stood among his companions in their little camp among the mountains. "Can it be that Mark Talbot entered into an agreement so infamous with this red-skin? The Indian dropped just enough words to make me guess their meaning. In heaven's name, does Talbot intend to carry out his part of the oath? Has gold debased him to this extent? I will keep my terrible suspicions to myself. Let the Indian go to the end of the trail; let him find the big bonanza as he has agreed to do. After that there will be time enough."

Red Cloud had already left camp and vanished.

Before doing so he had whispered in Merle's ear that he would soon return and lead them all, before sundown, to the long-lost treasure of the Sierras.

Merle Monterey was restless.

He saw the shadows shift as the sun crept higher, and his restlessness increased.

The members of his little command, slaves to Mark Talbot, like himself, went back to their cards, and invited him to join them; but he shook his head.

All at once he left the camp.

"Whenever I think of it my blood burns," came through his teeth. "If I had known this before we set out on this quest—if some spirit had whispered to me—No! I was to be drawn into the scheme blindly!" And he shut his hands and swore like a pirate in a frenzy till the echoes that came back along the mountain walls were curses of terrible import.

"Sold to a red-skin!—to a copper snake of the hills! By heavens! it is too much!" he cried. "I've heard of infamous compacts before, but this one beats them all. It should have been signed in hades! I thought better of Mark Talbot than this. I—But why talk about it? May the sun refuse to shine the day the reward is paid!"

He had gone a mile from camp, and was where he could give vent to his indignation without much danger of being seen or overheard.

Suddenly Captain Merle stopped and threw one hand to his face.

"It might have been a wolf or an Indian dog, but it looked too human to be either," he cried with his eyes riveted on a certain spot some

distance away where some bushes rose above the trail to the height of several feet.

"There it is again! By Jupiter! it is human!"

Captain Merle of the Silent Six leaned forward in the eagerness of discovery and held his breath.

An object human in shape yet strangely grotesque was creeping up the trail with the slowness of a crippled snake.

"Merle Monterey watched it with increasing curiosity, as each succeeding moment brought it a little nearer."

At last the eyes of the two people met, and the captain of Six beheld a wild face with a pair of eyeballs that burned like globes of fire. There was the stamp of hunger and suffering on every lineament exposed to view, and the sight seemed to root the California sport to the spot.

The clothes of the figure were rags, the hair was a mass of mountain burrs, and the hands that helped to drag the body over the ground had been terribly lacerated by the sharp stones.

Such a picture Captain Merle had never seen before, and his life had been a succession of wild scenes.

"In God's name, who are you?" demanded the sport as the crawler reached his feet and gave him a look of thankfulness.

"Nay! In the first place, who are you?" came from between the swollen lips before him.

"A name for a name is it?" laughed Merle.

"Well, then, I am Merle Monterey."

"Thank heaven!"

The satisfaction expressed by these two words was unmistakable.

The next moment the captain of the Silent Six was bending over the wretch who had crawled to his side.

"Merle Monterey?" he repeated in feeble tones. "Swear it!"

"I'll do that readily. By the living God, I am the owner of the name I have given!"

"That will do. I am Little Onyx. I left 'Frisco three weeks ago—straight from the private rooms of Mark Talbot."

Captain Merle let slip an ejaculation at mention of the nabob's name.

"I have been sent to you."

"To me?" echoed the sport.

"To no one else. You have been as hard to find as the lost bonanza itself. Two days ago I was thrown from my horse, which ran away and left me to die in the mountains. My thigh is broken, and I have had to drag myself along like a wounded wolf. Why did Mark Talbot select me as his messenger? Were there no others who knew this death-struck land?"

"What is the message and where is it?" exclaimed the impatient sport. "You have not lost it, Little Onyx?"

"I would have lost my life first," answered the man through his teeth.

He steadied himself on one hand and thrust the other into his bosom.

Merle Monterey could hardly wait.

As the lacerated hand produced a packet tied to a leather string about Little Onyx's neck, he snatched it out of his hand and started up.

"From Talbot? By Jupiter! it must be important," cried he.

"Read it and see," was the response, and then the wounded messenger watched Captain Merle as he cut the pocket open and drew forth a paper.

Important?

Captain Merle saw that it was so at the first glance, and while Little Onyx watched him out of his starved eyes, he read as follows:

"CAPTAIN MERLE:—I pray God this message may reach you soon. You have been absent past your time, but I have not given you up. Do not lose sight of your guide. When he has found the prize, mark well the spot, and the trails leading to it. Let there be no mistake. After that, report to me as the sole discoverer. *The Indian need not report at all!* You understand me, Captain Merle. I rely on you. I want but *one report*, and I want it from white lips. Destroy this and keep the secret."

"TALBOT."

Merle looked up with a smile. "It shall all be done!" he said, and then he tore the message up.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TIGER GUIDE.

WHEN the fragments of the message from 'Frisco had fallen around Merle Monterey's feet, Little Onyx ventured to speak again.

"What can you do for me?" he asked, in pleading tones.

"Are you hungry?"

"As a wolf."

"And badly hurt?"

"I am nearly dead."

"The camp is near," said Captain Merle. "If I take you there, the boys must not know that you came from Colonel Talbot."

"Of course not. Is the Indian with you still?"

"Red Cloud is here."

A look of aversion seemed to assert its power in the messenger's eyes.

Merle Monterey saw it.

"Don't you like the Klamath?" he asked.

"It is not that; but I was not to be seen by the Indian," was the answer.

"Did Talbot instruct you thus?"

"He did."

"This man can't live long," thought the leader of the Silent Six, studying Little Onyx for a moment. "The fall and its consequences have sapped his strength. Now that he has delivered his message, he will break down. I need not take him to camp. I can hide him in the cavern near by, and fortune will take care of him."

Little Onyx was then told that there existed, not far away, a somewhat secret cavern in the mountains, where he would not be seen by Red Cloud and where he could recover undisturbed.

"And plenty of food?" he asked, anxiously, as Merle enumerated the good points of the case.

"Of course. I am not the man to let Colonel Talbot's messenger suffer," cried Captain Merle.

Several minutes later he was carrying the cripple in his strong arms down the trail followed, though he knew it not, by a pair of eyes as keen as those of the eagle.

A bed of pine cones and mountain leaves was found in the interior of the cavern, and Little Onyx expressed his gratitude to the man, who placed him gently thereon and turned away to bring him food and drink from the camp near by.

"If I don't carry out Talbot's orders to the letter, may I never see 'Frisco again!" exclaimed Merle, as he walked away. "This is the day for the finding of the lost bonanza, and Red Cloud will be due in camp before long."

Merle's back had hardly been turned on the entrance of the cavern ere a lithe, half-naked figure glided forward and vanished.

It was Red Cloud, the 'Frisco nabob's gold-guide.

Pushing forward into the cave, he discovered the form stretched on the odorous couch, and for a little while he stood among the shadows and watched it intently.

At length he went forward again, and dropped suddenly and noiselessly at Little Onyx's side before that person knew he was near.

Mark Talbot's messenger let out a cry at sight of the dark-red face and blazing eyes that hung over him, and at the same time he felt the clutch of a hand at his wrist.

He knew that Red Cloud had come.

"Did the white messenger crawl all the way from 'Frisco?" asked the red.

Little Onyx looked up without making a reply. His silence tightened the Indian's grip.

"The tongue that talked to the white Captain Merle has not lost its power of speech," continued Red Cloud, his falcon look growing in intensity. "What did the paper say?"

"The paper?" echoed Little Onyx.

"The paper Merle tore up and threw on the trail."

"I don't know."

"No forked words!" admonished the Indian shaking his head. "Where did my crawling brother come from?"

"I was not to tell you."

"Oh!" laughed Red Cloud. "My brother brings a talking paper to Captain Merle, and he must not see Red Cloud the gold guide. What has the 'Frisco gold-bug said that Merle should hear, and not Red Cloud?"

"I don't know."

The Indian drew back and studied Little Onyx for a few seconds.

"You came from the nabob, eh?" he asked.

"Do you think so?"

"Speak! tell Red Cloud the truth. Why did Talbot send you to No-Gold Land? Is he tired of waiting?"

"I am not here to betray," was the reply at which the fire in the Indian's eye seemed to increase.

Ten minutes later a white man entered the cavern with a candle under his arm.

He advanced to the spot where a human form rested among the leaves, but as he stooped an exclamation of surprise parted his lips.

"Dead!" cried he. "Well, I can't say that I'm disappointed or displeased. Little Onyx won't betray anybody to the red-skin, and I alone possess the secret Colonel Talbot sent me from his desk in 'Frisco."

In the light that struggled into the cavern from the entrance lay Little Onyx, dead. Merle Monterey did not examine the body. He took it for granted that the broken thigh and fatigue had finished the nabob's messenger, and presently he stole away leaving Little Onyx alone in his wild sepulcher.

Captain Merle went back to camp and found Red Cloud waiting quietly for him while he watched the pards at a game of cards.

Nothing in the Indian's look or demeanor told that he knew something of Little Onyx's errand to the Sierras.

"The time has come," he whispered to Merle as the white sport approached.

The captain started and threw a look at his comrades. "You hear that, boys," he said. "Red Cloud says the time has come."

In an instant the game was broken up, and the players tossed the well-thumbed cards to the wind.

They had waited for this hour, and as they congregated about the cool-headed Indian who had led them up and down the trails of the Sierras for three months, they wondered if he had found the prize at last.

"Come!" cried Red Cloud, his figure straightening in a broad ray of sunlight. "The white trailers of the 'Frisco gold king can now see the lost mine of the old nabobs."

A shout went up from five throats.

Merle kept silence and tried to read the Indian's thoughts by a deep study of his face.

"Is Captain Merle ready?" asked Red Cloud.

"I've been ready for three months," was the reply.

"Red Cloud has found the prize. Look, brothers. The sun has not set though it travels like a ball of fire toward the west. We can reach the mine before it disappears. The chief of the Klamaths is now to keep his word."

Without another word the red gold guide wheeled and walked away.

"Come!" said Captain Merle to his companions. "I guess we have struck it rich at last."

Red Cloud continued to walk on with the haughty step of a chieftain of his race.

Not once did he look over his shoulders to see whether he was followed. The heavy steps behind him told him that he was not alone.

Captain Merle watched the red-skin with the eye of a hawk.

"Now or never," passed through the white sport's brain as he recalled the contents of the paper Little Onyx had delivered at the cost of his life. "This Indian is to be permitted to find the bonanza; but I am to deliver the report in 'Frisco. Such are the orders, and they are to be carried out to the letter. He is as shrewd as a fox and as strong as a lion; but what am I? Let the red find out before he reaches the end of the game!"

Red Cloud led the party at his back into a region which the mine-hunters had not explored.

It was like plunging into the unknown, and the men cast furtive glances at Captain Merle, as the shades grew darker and the trail seemed to lose itself in the sunless heart of the Wild Sierra.

"Go on, old fellow," muttered Merle Monterey. "You will find six cool men at your back. We are here to follow you into the shades of death, if you choose to lead us thither."

The sun was not high when Red Cloud halted and wheeled upon the little band with a puzzling look and an enigmatic smile.

The men looked from him upon their surroundings.

They had entered a ravine whose walls were masses of broken rocks, fallen trees and projecting boulders.

A wilder place the imagination of man could not conceive.

"Will the white followers wait for Red Cloud and Captain Merle?" asked the Indian.

The men glanced at their leader.

"Wait for us, if Red Cloud wants it so," said Merle. "We came hither to find the lost treasure for the colonel, and no danger, no request must daunt us. Yes, Red Cloud, the boys will wait. Come!"

The five men saw Merle and the red guide walk side by side down the ravine.

They watched them till they disappeared, and then they fell to congratulating themselves on the fact that their quest was nearly at its finish.

As for the two captains, the red one and the white, they advanced some distance among the rocks of the wild gulch, until the Indian halted suddenly, and pointed to what appeared to be a number of fallen but well-preserved trees piled upon each other.

"Behold the lost wealth of the Sierra nabobs!" he exclaimed.

Captain Merle looked with all his might.

"I see nothing," he answered, returning Red Cloud's glance with a smile.

"Where are my brother's eyes? Has he wore them out hunting the treasure, that he cannot see the doorway to it when it stands open before him?"

"Show me the door."

Instantly the Indian's hand closed on Captain Merle's arm.

The following minute the captain of the Silent Six stood at the logs, and then he saw an opening between them large enough to admit the body of a man.

Red Cloud threw his hat into the hole with a laugh.

"It is yonder, Captain Merle," he exclaimed, pointing forward. "Let us carry back to our white brothers evidence of the great treasure we have hunted for our master, the Californian."

The Indian pushed forward and plunged into the opening.

"Dare Captain Merle follow Red Cloud to the lost gold?" he exclaimed, throwing a bantering look at the 'Frisco sport.

"I'm here for that purpose!" was the quick response.

Merle Monterey followed the Klamath until he stood in a tunnel-like place beyond the light.

In one hand he held close along his sleeve an unsheathed bowie.

"An Indian for tricks, especially one like Red Cloud," he said to himself. "The moment I satisfy myself that he has led us to the lost bonanza, I will proceed to carry out the command forwarded by the hand of Little Onyx."

At that moment Captain Merle felt the touch of a hand at his wrist.

"Why does Merle my brother halt?" said a voice at his ear. "Red Cloud will make a light by and by and he will see evidence enough to dazzle his eyes."

"Go on, then."

Once more Merle was walking forward over a hard, smooth way. The air about him had that peculiar odor found in old mines.

All at once the Indian stopped. His hand left Captain Merle's wrist.

"Merle, my brother," said a voice in the dark. "The paper from 'Frisco has talked to two!"

Merle the sport understood these words. They went through him like a knife.

He fell back and threw up his hand, and just then a heavy body landed like a leaping panther against his breast!

CHAPTER XVII.

SLEUTH SAM'S NEW TRAIL.

THE five men in the gulch waited until they wondered what kept Red Cloud and Captain Merle.

More than an hour passed.

Growls of impatience became curses of rage, and at last the band moved forward.

The bed of the wild ravine was of such a nature as to give the sharp-eyed Californians no trail.

They saw the fallen trees but not the opening into which the gold guide had enticed the long-haired sport.

They passed the spot and went on.

Presently the gulch came to an end and they were puzzled.

What had become of the two trailers?

In the growing shadows of night the five held a consultation.

More than ever they believed the Indian false.

Red Cloud had brought them to the Sierras to perish miserably among the dangers that inhabited them.

He had begun the work by luring Captain Merle to his doom, and they were to be the next victims.

To turn back even under the present circumstances would be cowardice; therefore the bronzed quintette registered an oath to stay and hunt for Merle Monterey.

At that moment, while they stood with uplifted hands, a dark face in which were set two blazing eyes, was banging over a rock fifty feet above them.

It was the triumphant face of Red Cloud the Klamath.

"The eye of the Indian has found the treasure, and his hand will unlock it for the gold-bug of 'Frisco," said he. "The talking paper which Captain Merle tore up told Red Cloud enough to make him play a strong hand. Talbot is going back on the compact. The torn pieces, when picked up and put together by the Klamath's hands, talked just as they did to Merle. He wants Merle, not Red Cloud, to report at his fine house in 'Frisco. That is your game, Talbot. Never mind! The Indian will report and claim his reward."

When the five men turned back, the eyes of the red-skin followed them until they disappeared.

They returned to the gulch as if something told them that Captain Merle had not left it with the Indian.

The sable wings of night almost touched the earth.

"Look yonder!" suddenly cried one of the five, pointing up the opening. "Is there another person on this trail? By Jupiter! it looks that way."

Everybody looked over the outstretched arm, and instinctively several hands crept toward revolvers, whose butts peeped above leather belts.

It was not so dark as to prevent the men from seeing the figure that stood statue-like a few feet away.

A white man at that!

"Who ar' you?" demanded one of the Silent Six as he raised a six-shooter and covered the motionless man. "Friend or foe, stranger? An' be almighty quick about it, too!"

The answer was a forward movement on the part of the stranger, and the Californians eyed him closely as he came up.

They saw that he was well built, with a dark but pleasing face, a pair of expressive eyes, and with the shadow of a good-natured smile at his lips.

"From whar, stranger?" continued the spokesman of the five.

"From nowhar in particular."

"A rollin' stone, hey?"

"Mebbe so."

The men exchanged looks.

Not since they had entered No-Gold Land had they seen a white man besides themselves.

"Have you no name?" asked the leader of the band.

"Yes. I am Barnett Brooks."

"From whar?"

"Lately from 'Frisco."

"Wal, Mr. Brooks, we hope you're on no wild-goose chase like ourselves. Whar's the rest of you?"

"I'm alone."

"A private trail, eh?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you know whar you ar'?"

"We are just now in Lost Man's Canyon in No-Gold Land."

"Lost Man's Canyon! By heavens! that's appropriate. It keeps up its reputation by swallowing up our captain."

"How's that?"

"We've lost Captain Merle."

This was enough to bring the solitary trailer and the five men closer together. It formally broke the ice and introduced our old acquaintance, Sunshine Sam, to Mark Talbot's sworn bonanza-finders.

"We need not keep our secret any longer," resumed the head man of the five. "We are hunting for the lost mine which has interested Colonel Talbot of 'Frisco so long. Our guide has been an Indian named Red Cloud. We have followed him into this country, Captain Merle at his heels, we next to the captain."

"And you have lost your captain?" asked Sunshine Sam displaying a little impatience.

"Both the captain and Red Cloud," and the narrator proceeded and told the story of the startling separation as we have witnessed it.

"Have you ever hunted for men, Mr. Brooks?" was the eager question that followed.

"I've been in the business ten years."

The five men looked surprised.

"Then you must be a detective," was the response.

"That is what I'm called," smiled Sam.

"You're the man we want! Fortune sends you to us."

"I don't know about that. Fortune has given me some hard knocks in my time."

"We want to find Captain Merle and that infernal Injun, too."

"What about the bonanza?"

"That will come with one or the other. Will you help us?"

"I did not come to No-Gold Land to work for Mark Talbot."

"Hang the nabob! We want Captain Merle and vengeance! The red fox has played us false. He has led us into this region to perish at his hands. He wants all the glory and the reward. We will be satisfied to go back to 'Frisco and throw the head of the traitor at Talbot's feet."

Sunshine Sam seemed to think rapidly for a moment.

"I am in your employ, not in Mark Talbot's," said he. "Living or dead, Captain Merle shall be found!"

The five men greeted this with a shout of applause.

"Why does Talbot want the additional wealth of the lost bonanza?" asked the detective. "Has he not enough without it?"

"A rich man never has enough," was the reply.

"Mark Talbot is worth five millions."

"More than that, if report don't lie."

"And he wants more?"

"Always more."

It was some distance from the place of meeting that the interchange of words concerning the nabob's wealth took place.

Sunshine Sam and his new comrades had formed a quiet little camp under the slope of a wall, and in the light of a fire which revealed the faces of the men to one another, they were discussing the nabob's motives and the Indian's work.

"We're in an uninhabited wilderness," suddenly said one of the men.

"Are you sure of that?" asked Sam.

"Why not? Haven't we covered nearly every foot of ground in No-Gold Land, and found nothing to indicate the presence of man?"

"You forget the puzzle on the rocks, Yellow Yank."

"Oh, that tells us nothing."

"Where is the puzzle?"

It was Sunshine Sam who spoke, and his voice was quiet and unsuspicious.

"It's a mile from hyer, p'raps. I could go to it now."

"Cap'n, it's nothin' only a lot o' scratches on a rock which some day or other formed the back wall o' a shanty. Mebbe it's been fifty years ago; the letters look that way."

"Letters?" casually echoed Captain Coldgrip's pupil.

"Letters an' ben-tracks. The whole thing's a jumble. A Philadelphia lawyer couldn't find a startin' point in six months. Yank thar hung to the enigma till he war forced to give it up."

"I haven't given it up yet," put in Yellow Yank, whose dark features seemed to glow with excitement while he spoke. "I used to be good

on puzzles; but the boys wouldn't give me time on this one."

"Guess he wanted a year, from the way he started out on this one, cap'n."

The men laughed with more or less degrees of heartiness.

"I'd like for you to see the puzzle," continued Yellow Yank, looking at Sam. "If you're a detective, mebbe you've seen something of the kind. We kin go up to the place in the morn'ing."

"Why not now? You said awhile ago that you could find the spot by night."

"I can do it, captain."

The two men rose simultaneously.

Two minutes later they were walking side by side from the camp, moving along under the stars with the tops of the Sierras far overhead and the night winds blowing through the pines.

"Captain, what did you mean when you asked us if we war sartain these hills warn't inhabited?" suddenly questioned Yellow Yank.

"I meant that I've found a camp among them."

"No!"

"It is true."

"What is it called?"

"Blister City."

"It is not on any map I've ever seen of this country, Colonel Talbot's chart shows no traces of it."

"Perhaps not; but it is here just the same," replied Sam, with a smile.

"Who lives thar?" asked Yellow Yank, after a brief pause.

"A number of pards as wild as the mountains around them."

"No angels, I hope?"

"Yes, Blister City has one."

"A sample, I presume," and the bonanza trailer laughed.

"You may call her so."

Sunshine Sam's guide lapsed into silence, and for some time not another word was spoken.

"Hark!" suddenly whispered Yellow Yank, and as he halted Sam felt his sleeve clutched by his companion's hand. "Don't you hear that chisel at work somewhar?"

The independent sleuth made no reply, but listened with every sense on the alert. Now he heard distinctly what had not assailed his ears before—a sound like that of steel smiting a rock, like a sculptor at work.

"I never heard that afore to-night," said the whispered voice of Yellow Yank. "An' I've been down hyer more than once since we struck No-Gold Land."

The sound had a strange fascination or charm for Sunshine Sam, the detective.

He could distinguish blow from blow with a distinctness lent by the clearness of the night that hemmed them in.

All at once the noises ceased.

"I guess he's through," remarked Yellow Yank, taking a new breath.

"Who is?"

"By jingo! that's what I'd like to know," was the reply. "I don't know what it meant, but we've listened with our eyes open, eh, Captain Sam?"

"That we have, Yank. We have heard the concert on the rock, but I don't think we were to have the benefit of it."

"Mebbe not, mebbe not," repeated Yellow Yank. "The fellow isn't going to resume, so we can go on to the puzzle."

Once more the two men went forward, Yank slightly in the lead, and following the trail with the sureness of a hound.

"I guess we're hyer," he exclaimed at last.

"This is the place whar I've studied the letters and marks on the rock. Now let me strike a match. The stars won't do us any good, though daylight would."

Even while Yank talked, his hand drew several matches across a stone and struck a light.

"Lean forward and look, captain," he went on. "This is the identical rock whar—Heavens! the stone-cutter's been at work hyer!"

Yellow Yank started back while he uttered the cry; but Sunshine Sam snatched the matches from his hand and went toward the wall.

Then he saw the fresh marks of a chisel, and that every sign had been obliterated.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEATH SHOT.

YES, the "stone-cutter," as Yellow Yank called him, had been there.

Sunshine Sam inwardly cursed the fiend and his work while he gazed at the defaced rock with the assistance of the matches.

Yellow Yank did not keep back his disgust, but swore roundly, and with no choice of expletives.

"If we had hurried up we might have caught the fellow at work!" suddenly remarked the California tough. "You see what he has done, captain; he has destroyed the letters and marks on the wall, and the puzzle no longer exists. Of course he had a motive. Confound the gopher! if I had him hyer, I'd have a motive in choking him to death!"

Yellow Yank meant what he said, and the detective gave his approval in a look.

"You are right; the man who obliterated the inscription, whatever it was, meant something."

"War he afraid, captain, that it war connected with the lost bonanza?"

"What do you mean?"

"The idea just happened to strike me," grinned Yank. "Mebbe the stone-cutter war the Injun."

"Red Cloud?"

"Red Cloud!"

Sunshine Sam made no reply.

His matches had gone out, and the rocky wall again rose dark and ghostly before them.

"You studied the marks, I believe?" he said at length, touching Yellow Yank's arm.

"I studied 'em till the boys nearly pulled me away," was the response.

"Did you fix any of them in your mind?"

"I've got some of them thar, but mebbe not enough to give you a starter, captain."

"Let us go back a short distance," said Sunshine Sam. "We can make a pine fire under the rocks and be secure from observation."

The two men walked back together.

Some distance from the defaced rock they gathered a few cones and dry pine branches and carried them under a sloping wall of solid stone where they made a fire.

Their position was such that the light did not fall beyond the rock itself, but was confined in the place they occupied.

"Here is paper," said the detective handing Yellow Yank a leaf from a memorandum with the book itself to serve as a desk.

"I'm no artist," smiled Yank, looking up into his face. "An' then I don't see how the letters on the rock ar' goin' to help us find Captain Merle."

"We'll get to that by and by. I want the legend of the rock as you can draw it from memory."

Yellow Yank sat down on a stone and took the pencil and paper.

Sunshine Sam leaned against a rock near by and watched him.

Yank began slowly.

The light was uncertain and his fingers were thumbs when it came to handling a pencil.

"Perseverance makes the horse go," he observed glancing up at his watcher.

"Take your time to it, Yank."

For five minutes Yellow Yank worked slowly. He did not make a move without thinking, and when he did draw it was with the movements of a snail.

All at once there came from beyond the sheltering rock the clear echoing report of a fire-arm.

Instinctively Sunshine Sam turned toward the trail with one hand already at his revolver, and a foot thrown forward to meet a foe.

The sound died away and was not repeated.

"It was not intended for us," thought the sleuth. "What does Yellow Yank think of it?"

He looked at his companion at that moment, and then sprung toward him with a sudden cry.

Yellow Yank had dropped paper and pencil, and was leaning against the rock, a strange wild stare in his eyes, and the stub of a pencil clutched in one hand.

There was no mistaking the import of the pistol-shot. It had been intended for one of them.

Sunshine Sam gave his comrade but one look as he bent over the body.

A drop of blood that seemed to shine rested on the trailer's dark-brown shirt.

Yellow Yank was dead!

"The work of the stone-cutter!" ejaculated Sam, and then he picked up a piece of paper which his eyes caught sight of at that moment. "Yank was not permitted to proceed far with his work."

He bent forward in the light and examined the rude tracings on the paper which had just fluttered from Yellow Yank's fingers.

It was a jumble of letters and marks, a veritable puzzle to the shrewdest, and after a look, Sunshine Sam thrust it into his pocket.

"It may be my pointer after all," thought he. "To my notion, this gold-game is just getting exciting. I see that I have a cool fce to fight—one that will not hesitate to use the six-shooter to clear his way. Yellow Yank was killed to prevent him from being of service to me. The game is to keep me away from Mark Talbot's Sierra bonanza. If the play succeeds, I will have been baffled for the first time."

Sunshine Sam put out the fire and left the dead under the ledge.

He had seen nothing of the slayer. With the tread of a panther, the destroyer had approached his victim, and with the same caution had retired.

The detective walked back toward the camp where he had left the four toughs.

He went over the ground with weapons at his touch, fully expecting all the time to see the flash of the slayer's pistol.

He found the men where he had left them, and more than one inquisitive look greeted him when he returned alone.

"Whar is Yank?" chorused the four men.

Before Sunshine Sam could reply there sprung

into the view of all a figure that made every man start.

"Let Sunshine Sam hear me! I have broken the Eternal code to find him!" exclaimed a voice.

"Meta of Blister City!" cried the detective. "In God's name, girl, what brings you hither?"

Mark Talbot's gold-hunters opened their eyes with amazement. The detective knew the girl!

"Not for these men! I don't know them," she went on, coming close to the sleuth. "I have no secrets for them. Sunshine Sam, you must listen to me."

The detective permitted the Angel of Blister City to draw him from the eager group, and a few feet from them her hand tightened on his wrist.

"I want you to serve me," she said. "You say you are a detective, and Saturn says that you've had the best of schooling. The young man from 'Frisco has disappeared."

"Jackson Janes!"

"Yes. He was asked to join the Eternal League."

"Well?"

"He refused."

"He had grit, girl."

"Fatal courage!" was the reply. "The code deals out death to those who refuse to take the oath of the League."

"Did they carry it out on the young man?"

"He has disappeared."

"What does Saturn say?"

"He tells me that Jackson Janes will never trail another bonanza."

"Saturn does not like him."

"Saturn is peculiar, and knows how to hate royally," smiled Meta. "I believe that the law was not carried out to the letter."

"What gives you hope?"

The young girl hesitated.

"I can hardly say," she said at length. "It may be a groundless hope, but I cling to the belief that Jackson Janes is not dead."

"Why should they spare him?"

"I don't know."

The detective smiled.

"He was taken from his cabin by the white-capped members of the League," she went on.

"They generally shoot those who refuse the code where the refusal is given. The members of the League will tell me nothing. Saturn shows his teeth as a wolf smiles when I ask him about Jackson Janes. Can't you come back to Blister City and add another trail to your present work? You can solve the mystery."

It was hard to resist an appeal like this, and Sunshine Sam found himself looking down into the fair face of the only female member of the Sierra League.

"I will help you," she continued, following up her last sentence quickly. "Trinidad Tom says he has employed you to solve the mystery surrounding Monte's death. You can work at the other one at the same time. I will try to put you on the trail. Don't say no, Sunshine Sam. I have crossed the dead line to find you. I am out of the domain of the Eternal League."

"What is the penalty for crossing the line, Meta?"

"It is death."

"They would not visit the penalty on you?"

"If they knew what took me across the boundary they would."

"Where is the line on this side?"

"It is between us and Haunted Ranch, where the strange inscription is on the rock."

"The letters and the marks, Meta?"

"Yes."

"Did you come that way?"

"I passed the spot only a while ago."

"And saw nothing?"

"Nothing, Captain Sam—not even the ghost for which Old Resolute has out a standing reward of ten dollars."

The girl laughed fearlessly as she ended her last sentence, but her face soon became serious again.

"Why do you question me?" she asked.

"The letters are not there now, Meta," said Sam.

"Not in the stone?" exclaimed the girl, stepping back. "They must be there!"

"They were cut out to-night."

"Ah! the sounds I heard—like some hammer striking stone!" was the quick exclamation.

"Who cut them out?"

Sunshine Sam shook his head.

"Ah! I recollect. Saturn has talked several times about doing it!" she cried. "He used to say that they would bring adventurers to the spot if the outside world got to hear of them. But I did not miss Saturn from Blister. I am sure he was in camp when I left, still—"

She stopped and thought for a moment.

"It is another puzzle for me, Captain Sam," she resumed. "Come back to Blister and take the trail where I believe it begins. I will keep nothing back. You will have Saturn and the rest of them to fight if they suspect you, but I will stand by you. You will find a true friend in Meta of Blister City. For heaven's sake don't say no."

"Will you go back now if I say yes?" asked the detective.

"I will leave you this minute."

"Then go back, girl. Before long I will be in Blister City."

"Thank heaven, and good-night!" cried the girl, and the next instant her figure vanished, and Sunshine Sam was alone.

CHAPTER XX.

SEALED ORDERS.

THE revelation of Yellow Yank's death, as told by Sunshine Sam, fell upon the ears of Talbot's gold-hunters like the bursting of a thunder-bolt. They could not and would not believe until they stood around the body under the shelving rock, and looked at the work of the unknown slayer.

Then a startling vow of vengeance, such as even the detective had never heard in his career, was caught up by the winds and borne away.

Yellow Yank was buried near the spot where he had met his death, and his comrades went back to the little camp eager to be led to the trail by the man in whom they had already trusted.

As for Meta, she had turned back toward Blister City.

Having found the man whom she had sought, she had nowhere to go but to the haunt of the Eternal League, and the night was more than half spent when she glided into camp and sought her own cabin.

Meta congratulated herself on her success.

She had been fortunate in finding the sleuth, and she thought that he would keep his promise and solve the mystery that hung over the fate of Jackson Janes, the young man from 'Frisco.

"The girl has been out—beyond camp, too," muttered a man who saw Meta enter the cabin on her return. "I don't know what took her away but I have an idea, and I'll find out. Isn't she satisfied with what I've told her? She got the same information at every point, but still she doesn't wholly believe. I must attend to this," and with a last look at the cabin the man walked slowly away.

Almost immediately upon entering the cabin Meta had sought her couch where she fell into a deep sleep.

Her long rough trip in search of Sunshine Sam had exhausted her, and she was not likely to know anything of happening events till the next day.

The man who had witnessed her return kept on down the main street of Blister City until he reached a certain shanty the door of which he opened and went in.

"Hello!" said a voice on the inside at sound of which the man stopped suddenly, but almost immediately broke out into a chuckle of recognition.

"I found you out and so I've waited for you," the same voice continued.

"That was right. How long have you been hyer, Trinidad?"

"Twenty minutes."

"I'm a night-hawk, you know. I'll get a light an'—"

"No light, Saturn. These are times when we can talk in the dark in Blister," was the interruption. "No light, if you please."

"Just as you like, captain."

"I've got a mission for you, Saturn."

"For me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You must go to 'Frisco."

Saturn recoiled with an exclamation of amazement.

"To 'Frisco? Why didn't you say to the North Pole?" he cried.

The smile that crossed Trinidad Tom's face was not seen by the man who sat across the rough table.

"I have made a discovery concerning Monte's death," continued the captain of the Eternal League. "The blow came from 'Frisco—straight from the city of the nabobs to the camp in the mountains."

"I don't think that."

"If I chose, I could furnish proof that would convince you. Monte was a special object of murder—a marked man."

"Then he wasn't killed for the prize he is supposed to have found among the dead man's effects?"

"No. I've given up that theory, Saturn. My discoveries have demolished it completely. Having accomplished his mission, the slayer has returned to his master."

"To 'Frisco?"

"To 'Frisco."

"What about the foot-print with the nails running across it?" inquired Saturn.

"We were right. It belonged to the assassin. We will see it here no more. Saturn, old boy, I am going to send you upon a very important mission. You are to go to 'Frisco by the shortest trail. If possible, you are to get ahead of the slayer—to beat him home, don't you see? I will prepare certain sealed instructions for you while you are getting ready."

"When am I to start?"

"Right away."

Again Saturn drew back and looked at the man dimly outlined a few feet away.

Why all this hurry? and how had Trinidad Tom managed to discover all this?

Saturn was puzzled; his look showed it.

"You know the code," he argued. "We can not quit camp except to trail a traitor."

"We bend it a little to suit the occasion," was the reply, and Saturn fancied the words were accompanied by a slight smile. "If you will come to my cabin at the end of thirty minutes, I will equip you."

Thirty minutes! In half an hour Saturn was to be sent upon a mission which he had not dreamed of.

What did it mean? Was there not something behind it more than he could see?

Saturn seemed to feel the air thicken about him when he left his own shanty and stood half bewildered in the starlight.

Trinidad Tom was gone and the well known figure of the boss of Blister City had already disappeared.

"To 'Frisco?" murmured Saturn and he repeated the words over and over like a person but half awake. "I am to go to 'Frisco—for what! Sent away by Captain Trinidad—to beat a murderer home, he says. Sealed instructions, too! I don't see the need of such things. Trinidad must have played fox almighty well since I left camp. He knows that Monte was a marked man—that he wasn't killed for anything he may have found in the dead man's bundle. It is a case of vengeance, and the blow came from 'Frisco, Trinidad knows all this. I've had my eyes open all the time. Why haven't I found out something?"

Saturn walked slowly down the mountain street.

Old Resolute's bar had closed and the last man had turned in.

"Must I go?" he asked himself. "Confound it! what does the oath say? We of the League must obey every command issued by the captain, yet, he was not expected to send any of us beyond the boundary-line of the domain."

Saturn stopped at a certain cabin and listened awhile, with his bronzed fingers at the wooden latch.

At last he opened the portal softly and entered on tip-toe. The next moment he bent over the figure of a young girl asleep on a cot.

It was Meta.

The sleep of the angel of the camp was deep and apparently dreamless, and Saturn watched her a little time as the lamp, burning dimly against the wall over the bed, revealed the beautiful tableau to him.

Once or twice the sport of No-Gold Land raised his hand to break the girl's slumbers, but as often he let it fall without accomplishing the mission.

"She's earned this sleep. I can't disturb her," muttered Saturn. "I'm going away without her knowledge. If anything happens to her by reason of my going off, something will take place when I come back!"

He looked once more at the girl steadily and closely for several moments, and then left the cabin as secretly as he had entered it.

Meta slept on, unconscious of this visit.

"I am ready," said Saturn in a husky voice as he stepped into a shanty and confronted Trinidad Tom, sealing with red wax at a small table a piece of gray paper which he had folded.

The captain of the Eternal League seemed to start at the unnatural tones of Saturn's voice, but when he saw the preparations for departure made by his lieutenant a smile stole over his face.

"It is not my business to ask questions. I am here to obey," Saturn continued. "Is it still 'Frisco?"

"It is."

Captain Trinidad pushed the sealed instructions across the table.

"You are not to open the paper until you have entered the city," he went on, glancing up at the eyes fixed upon him.

"Are the instructions full, captain?"

"They are."

Saturn's hand closed on the paper, and Trinidad saw it leave the table.

"Where's your horse?" asked Captain Tom.

"Outside."

As he answered, Saturn drew back almost to the door.

"I am going," said he, touching his hat to the man whose coal-black eyes were regarding him with a gleam akin to secret triumph. "Remember! if anything happens while I'm gone, I'll get even when I come back."

There was a terrible emphasis in these words, and the eyes of the two men met while they were spoken.

"What do you expect to happen?" queried Trinidad Tom.

"Never mind," with a wave of the hand. "I am going to 'Frisco, but I'm coming back! There's not power enough in the city of the money kings to keep Saturn there. Good night, Captain Tom."

It is doubtful whether Trinidad Tom heard the parting.

He saw the door open and shut on the man who walked out with the tread of a king, and

the next second there came to his ears the rapid gallop of a horse.

"Does he suspect anything?" cried Trinidad Tom, leaving his stool and standing astonished in the glare of his lamp. "Did he tell Meta that he was going to Frisco? He was in her cabin for awhile. No; I think he kept the secret of the journey to himself."

Already Saturn was beyond the confines of Blister City, and his horse was striking occasional sparks from stones in the mountain trail. He was well armed and well mounted, and he carried the sealed orders next his heart.

When day came again, and the pines and peaks of the Sierras stood revealed once more in the beams of the rising sun, little groups of men were seen here and there in Blister City, and a crowd stood in front of Old Resolute's bar, already open.

They had heard a very important piece of news.

Saturn had deserted.

Nobody could tell exactly from whence the news had come.

It had been discovered that one of the three horses belonging to camp was missing, and rumor said that Saturn's shanty showed traces of desertion.

Trinidad Tom when questioned said, with a well-assumed look of regret, that he was afraid the truth had not been half told.

He feared that Saturn had added treachery to desertion.

"Saturn of Blister City a traitor!" exclaimed Meta, when a tall tough brought her the prevailing news. "In Heaven's name, what can have happened to turn him against the League?"

She went at once to Trinidad Tom.

"Tell me that these rumors are not true," she cried. "Saturn is not a traitor to Blister. It is impossible!"

"The men believe it, and Saturn is not here," was the reply. "The League has just met and outlawed him. The League never makes a mistake."

With a singular look at the speaker, Meta turned slowly away.

"There is some deep game here," she murmured. "Now is the time for Sunshine Sam to come. He promised me last night that he would soon be in Blister City. Why doesn't he come?"

Even while Meta put the question to herself a man came into view from between two cabins.

He was well-built, though his clothes were poor, and over his back hung a part of a prospector's kit.

The girl studied the strange figure for a moment, and then advanced toward the man.

"As a friend," said she, "I warn you to put this camp at your back. This is the home of the Eternal League!"

The answer was a smile, half-fearless, half-incredulous.

CHAPTER XXI.

TRINIDAD TOM IN LUCK.

A NEW man in Blister City at that particular time was likely to be regarded with more or less suspicion.

This one was not an exception, for when he smiled in Meta's face after the warning, he walked toward Old Resolute's bar as if he knew exactly where to find the place.

The girl had already given him up for a tough case, and, with a look which said: "I have warned you; I leave you to your fate," she went back to her cabin to think about Saturn's sudden departure and the wild rumors afloat concerning it.

The stranger introduced himself to the crowd at the counter as Luckless Luke. His general appearance bore out his statement to a dot, and from the first he became the butt of many not very elegant remarks.

He professed to have stumbled onto Blister City by the merest accident, and proceeded by saying that if he had struck an exclusive community, he was willing to make amends by getting away as speedily as possible.

His very *bonhomie*, of which he seemed to have an endless supply, despite his unlucky prospecting, rather drew him into the good graces of the crowd, and in the droll yarns he spun with his peeping elbows on the counter, caused the toughs of Blister to forget the man they had just outlawed as traitor and deserter.

Before Luckless Luke had been forty minutes in the hidden camp of the Sierras, the pards were proposing to one another to take him into the Eternal League lest they lose him by procrastination.

The proposition was thrown out in a cautious manner, but Luckless Luke said he would like to find a lost wife before he settled down, even in a community which had so many inviting advantages as Blister.

This adroit reply caused the mountain toughs to desist for a time.

Trinidad Tom did not get a look at the new arrival till late in the afternoon of the same day.

When he first saw him he was reading half-

aloud, for his lips moved, the misspelled notice of outlawry which had been nailed to a rough board on a tree in the center of the camp.

"Who war that individual called Saturn?" asked Luckless Luke, wheeling upon Captain Trinidad, as that individual came up.

"He belonged here," was the somewhat tartly spoken reply.

"Went off without notice, eh?"

"Yes."

"On purpose ter work mischief against you all?"

"You are right."

The unlucky prospector glanced at the notice again.

"I wonder," he exclaimed, and the next moment he presented a full front to Trinidad.

"Mightn't thar be some mistake?" he asked.

"Whar I come from they give the accused the benefit o' the doubt."

"But there's no doubt here," was the prompt reply, and Trinidad's eyes seemed to snap. "Besides, we know what we're doing when we put up a notice of that kind."

"I would think so," nodded Luckless Luke. "From the citizens you've got here, I wouldn't like to be posted like that. We used to run things pretty much the same way in our old camp on Devil's Creek. We got picked up occasionally, like I presume you do here. Our last outlaw, a fellow called Noland—"

"Noland?" echoed Trinidad Tom, with an apparent start. "We hung a man with that name in this very camp a few days ago."

"Ten to one that it was our Noland!" exclaimed Luckless Luke. "What did he do that you gave him a mountain necktie?"

"Cheated at cards."

"That's the man. Did he die game, captain?"

"As gamey as a man ever died."

"I always said he would. Nick Noland had some good traits about him."

"He didn't let us see any," smiled Trinidad.

"Mebbe you lynched him too soon to give him a chance. That man had a hobby."

"What was it?"

"Lost bonanzas."

"Then, by Jupiter! we didn't get at him soon enough. He proved to be the death of the best man of Blister City. And after he was dead, too."

"I don't quite understand."

"It was this ways. He auctioned off the pard's duds after the necktie matinee. Monte bought 'em, and took 'em home. That night Monte was killed by an unknown hand, and, as we all believe, for something he found in the dead man's luggage."

Luckless Luke listened with much curiosity.

"Killed for something he found in his purchase, eh?" he repeated.

"That's the impression."

"I guess you're right, captain."

"What do you know?"

"I happen to know just what Nick Noland had on his person."

Trinidad Tom gave utterance to an exclamation he found impossible to keep back.

"Was it worth taking life for?" he asked, trying to conceal his eagerness.

"Is a million and more worth striking for?"

"Let's go down to my cabin," said Trinidad.

"You may be the man I've been waiting for."

"I've got no secrets, Captain Trinidad."

The leader of the Eternal League answered with a laugh, and the next moment the two men were walking shoulder to shoulder through the gathering dusk.

There was more animation than usual in the depths of Luckless Luke's eyes as they stole glances at Trinidad Tom during the journey to the latter's hut.

The unfortunate prospector had lost the drollery which had delighted Old Resolute's customers, and he now looked like a man whose coming to Blister City had not been the result of an accident.

"I don't like a man with secrets, therefore, you're just to my liking," remarked Trinidad when he had shut the door of his own shanty behind him and Luckless Luke. "You say you knew Noland, eh?"

"As I'd be expected to know my brother almost."

"Was his secret genuine?"

"I regard it so."

"Tell me."

Trinidad Tom leaned against the log at his back and looked at the man whose coming to Blister City he had already regarded as a "lucky find."

"Noland was called crazy by some people, but he had no mad bee in his bonnet though he kept some queer notions thar," began Luckless Luke. "Just whar he picked up the bonanza chart which he undoubtedly had on his person when he came to Blister I don't know. He always said some spies were on his track, and the fact that the man war killed who got his effects proves it to me. I've seen Noland's secret many a time."

"Saw it?" ejaculated Trinidad.

"It was in black and white, or at least what used to be that, anyway."

"A bonanza chart was it?"

"Yes."

"He never let you take a copy of it, I presume?"

"Of course not. I think another man got that opportunity once."

"A man in your camp?"

"No. He was a mere boy when he stole a march on Noland and got the copy. But he didn't keep it long."

"Had it stolen in turn?"

"Not exactly. I've heard him say that he lost it, but he would always add, tapping his head with his finger, that he still had a grip on it all the same."

Captain Trinidad could not keep down the excitement which showed itself in his eyes.

"Where is the fellow now?"

"That's what I don't exactly know. It's more than likely, though, that he's somewhere on the trail of the bonanza. The last I heard o' him he was trying to sell his ideas to a 'Frisco nabob, who is said to be slightly off on the subject of buried millions somewhere among the Sierra Nevadas."

"Was he trying to bargain with Mark Talbot?" smiled Trinidad.

"The very man! I guess you all know him and his hobby!" exclaimed Luckless Luke. "Well, as I war saying, the last I heard o' Jackson Janes—"

"Heavens! was that his name?" broke out Captain Trinidad.

"Jackson Janes it was. Did you ever hear of him?"

Trinidad's look was a peculiar one.

It was a half-betrayal, yet he tried to conceal his real feelings while the prospector looked him in the eye.

"Names sometimes have familiar sounds—I've heard so many in my time," he said, after a moment's swift thought. "Do you really tell me that Jackson Janes actually possessed Noland's secret at one time?"

"He undoubtedly did."

"If this is true, why did he never find the bonanza?"

"He said he never wanted it for himself. His father lost his life on a foolish hunt of the kind, and this seemed to turn young Janes against 'em. He intended to keep track of Noland—to kind o' guard him like, but as you men pulled Noland up here in Blister City, I suspect that Janes didn't carry out his plans."

"He never got to save Noland from the rope, anyhow. I wish I had known this before. If I had, Luckless Luke, there would have been no sale of Noland's goods."

"Which means that Monte would not be a corpse to-night, and that Trinidad might be on the mountain slope."

"By thunder, no!" cried Captain Tom, striking the table with his big brown hand. "The knife that found Monte would not have found me under the same circumstances. Monte was not on his guard. I would have been on mine. Is this all you know about Noland and Jackson Janes?"

"Pretty much all."

Trinidad Tom was silent for a little while.

"Where are you making for?" he suddenly asked.

"I'm heading for 'Frisco. I may strike it rich between here and there. Give me the chance Jackson Janes had, and I'll agree to be a nabob inside of six weeks."

"How would you get there?"

"I wouldn't pretend to work the claim. There are more men than Mark Talbot who are willing to pay for a bonanza like that one is."

"Why didn't Jackson Janes sell?"

"Because he suddenly came to the conclusion that he was doing Noland an injustice."

"A little conscience, ha, ha," laughed Trinidad Tom.

"You can call it so."

It was strange that from that moment the conversation lagged so far as the Captain of the League was concerned.

His aim now seemed to be to get rid of Luckless Luke as soon as possible, and that individual was not averse to the success of the scheme.

He said at last that he believed he would go back to Old Resolute's and join "the boys," and Trinidad put in no remonstrance.

"I fancy that Blister rather likes you," said Captain Tom when to his delight he saw the shapely figure of Luckless Luke at the door.

"You don't have to hasten your departure because we're rather exclusive hyer. We won't force you to join the Eternal League if you wish to remain in camp several days."

"I may take a notion to join without compulsion. Hang me, Captain Trinidad, if I don't like the society hyer. But I'll see you later. Good-night!" and the dark hand that touched the dilapidated hat in parting salute won Trinidad's respect because it took the prospector away.

Luckless Luke was not far from the cabin ere Trinidad Tom was also beyond the door.

"What could have been luckier than this?" he exclaimed. "Fortune threw this busted gold hunter into my path. By the eternal stars! I date my new turn in life from this hour!"

A moment afterward Trinidad Tom was

walking rapidly away—too fast to hear behind him a laugh and the words.

"Fools are not all dead yet. Why, these mountains are full of them!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BACK TO CAPTAIN MERLE.

CAPTAIN MERLE MONTEREY of Mark Talbot's Silent Six had committed one fatal blunder, and when, in the gloom of the cavern into which Red Cloud had enticed him he felt the weight of the Indian on his breast, he fully realized his mistake.

He should have totally destroyed the message he had received from San Francisco through the hands of Little Onyx, the unfortunate sport.

The eagle eyes of the red gold guide had discovered the fragments, and his deft fingers had put them together until the writing in its entirety stood revealed.

Red Cloud could read the white man's writing, and Talbot's commands to his captain were fully understood by the Indian whose eyes seemed to blaze as he mastered the torn sentences.

The attack in the cave was so sudden, so irresistible, too, that Merle the sport was at the red-skin's mercy before he could recover.

A hand that had the grip of a vise of steel closed at his throat ere he could sound an alarm to the comrades he had left in the gulch not far from the cavern, and he felt the hot breath of Red Cloud on his face.

"Merle, my brother, not Red Cloud is to report to Talbot," cried the Indian. "The talking paper came a long way to tell him. Why didn't Talbot tell him before he left Frisco? Then he would have had a secret to keep, and Red Cloud might not have discovered it."

Captain Merle was pushed back with a suddenness that almost lifted him off his feet.

"There will come a day of reckoning," he sent through his teeth into the face he could not see. "When it comes it will be the blackest day in your calendar. Blow for blow, Red Cloud."

A sound like a low chuckle of derision was the answer he received.

The following moment his feet touched and slipped on loose pebbles, and then he was thrown from the Indian's grasp with all the strength Red Cloud could summon for the feat.

A cry of horror died away in Merle's throat when he found himself falling down—down—of course to certain death!

Some time afterward a man wrapped in total darkness was feeling his way around the walls of an almost circular chamber.

His progress was slow and cautious.

He felt the rock as high as he could reach, and not content with this, he examined it by touch to the floor of the cavern.

Not a word escaped him; he did his work in silence.

If there was an outlet to the place, he failed to find it. Round and round he went, like a man walled up while asleep.

"The infernal wretch knew whither he was sending me!" broke forth the prisoner at length, when the peculiar shape of a certain stone told him that he had come back to his starting-place. "This may not be the lost bonanza, but it is a mine of some kind, for I can feel the marks of picks on the walls. If I had but a match I might make a discovery, but I haven't one lucifer to my name. What am I to do?—die here like a rat in an abandoned trap? Was I born for this—I, Merle Monterey, who has faced death in a hundred shapes in as many places? No! Not while I owe obedience to Colonel Talbot, and vengeance to Red Cloud, the California tiger, I will not despair. This death-trap shall not hold the bones of the man it has caught! I defy it to keep Merle Monterey here!"

So the man in the underground cave was Captain Merle.

He knew not how much time had elapsed since his downward plunge from the mad clutch of the gold guide.

He had been knocked unconscious, fortunately not killed, but here he was, hemmed in by stone walls as solid as a flawless rock and higher than he could reach.

No wonder that he paced his prison like a caged animal, no wonder that he had felt the walls again and again until his hands grew sore going over the rough surface.

The caged rat examines every corner of his trap, and Merle had done the same.

Breathing of vengeance, curses, and vows to escape passed his lips from time to time.

"I will stand between the Indian and Talbot's desk! Now that I know what reward Red Cloud is to receive, I swear anew that it shall never be paid! I have never been beaten by a red-skin, and I never will be."

Merle could talk thus and yet find no avenue to freedom.

His knife made no impression in the stone, and he was disappointed in his hopes of cutting steps to liberty.

If the band knew it! If they knew!—Ah! that was the thing.

Red Cloud would go back to them with some well-earned story, if he went back at all.

Perhaps he would kill the men one by one

until he had depleted the Silent Six, and Mark Talbot no longer possessed a sworn league of bonanza-trailers.

Hour after hour passed away.

Day and night were one to the man shut up in the dread dungeon of the Sierras. It looked like foolishness for him to try to escape.

At last he gathered up the loose pebbles that lay scattered over the floor of the cavern and made a heap of them in a certain spot.

The stones were small and the task herculean; but Captain Merle did not despair.

When he had the floor picked clean he had a pyramid of stones nearly three feet high.

He had not accomplished his task without noise, and several hours had passed during his labors.

At last the imprisoned sport mounted the column and raised his hands along the wall.

The next instant a cry of victory burst from his throat.

He could touch the top of the wall!

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed. "The Indian will soon have a white Satan on his track. The lost bonanza will be the death of the man who kills to make the way clear to the prettiest wife in California."

For some minutes Captain Merle gathered strength for the task now before him. As he had found the top of the dungeon wall, his next move would be to draw himself up and make a dash for freedom.

"Now for the first move toward vengeance!" he cried, beginning the effort. "Look out, devil in scarlet. The worst foe you ever had is pulling himself out of the mountain trap."

A second later Merle Monterey was hanging along the wall, his whole weight on his hands, and his eager heart in his throat.

All at once one of his wrists was clutched from above! The next instant it was wrenched loose and at the same time some one in the darkness laughed fiendishly in his face.

It was like the sound of doom at the doors of escape, and all at once, while it still sounded, the man from Frisco fell back with the devilish cackling sound in his ears!

Of course he knew, or thought he knew, who had torn his hands loose. There was but one person in the Sierras who would do that little thing, and it made Merle's blood boil when he thought that he had been touched by Red Cloud, the Klamath!

"Come down!" cried the sport, standing on the floor of the cavern and looking up toward the unseen enemy who had prevented his escape. "Come down and fight it out with the man who will baffle you in the end if you dare to leave him here alive! Red Cloud, I know why you hunt the lost mine for Colonel Talbot. I have discovered the motive that drew you into No-Gold Land. No! you don't want a share in the bonanza when found. You have bargained with Talbot for a richer prize, but, by the eternal heavens! you will never get it. Medora Talbot shall not become the wife of a red snake like Red Cloud, the Klamath!"

Merle would have thought there would have been a reply to hot words like these, but to his surprise, there was none.

If the Indian was up there, he did not see fit to hurl down any defiance, not even the cutting laugh which he knew so well how to sound.

Merle was obliged to waste his anger in the darkness of the cave, and, having done so, he did not go back to his heap of stones for some time.

Red Cloud would not watch there forever; but he could endure it as long as his enemy, for, without food in the dungeon, starvation would sap the prisoner's strength, while the red hawk of California could get a living from without.

This thought nerved the man in the trap to new vows and new efforts to escape.

He carried the stones to another place, one by one, and with the utmost silence. He placed them securely on a heap until he had a second pyramid as strong as the first.

Surely nobody had heard him at his work this time.

Sharp-eared as Red Cloud was, he could not have caught any sounds where there were none.

Slowly and with caution Captain Merle of the Silent Six again mounted to the top of his stone pile.

He planted himself firmly there and raised his hands.

This time he would succeed.

He had formed a plan which would make him victor if Red Cloud had heard the building of the second heap.

Once more he touched the top of the wall, and as the touch sent a thrill through every nerve his fingers closed for the pull upward.

"Ho! is Merle of the Silent Six a fool?" said a stern voice in the inky gloom. "Does he forget that Red Cloud has the eyes of the mountain owl?"

At the same time, as before, his left wrist was touched by a hand that closed to wrench him loose!

"Now or never!" cried Captain Merle. "If I go to perdition from this place, the red worker of my ruin goes along!"

Quick as a flash the Frisco sport threw his other hand toward the unseen fingers, and, as

luck would have it, closed on a wrist not his own.

An exclamation of almost savage triumph burst from his throat.

He threw himself back as he clung to the wrist, and pulled downward with all his might! A wild cry answered his effort, and all at once Captain Merle fell at full length on the floor of the cavern, the wrist of his pal slipping from his grasp as he struck!

For a second he lay there stunned, but by no means unconscious.

He knew one thing, and that was that he had pulled Red Cloud over the top of the wall, and that the Indian was somewhere in the walled dungeon with him!

There was something thrilling in the thought.

Merle Monterey was unarmed except with a knife whose point had been dulled by his efforts to cut a way up the wall to freedom.

He did not know where Red Cloud was.

The desperate Indian might be near, and he might put out his hand and touch the human tiger he would have to fight to the death in the Stygian gloom of the mountain mine!

For some moments the captain of the Silent Six stood firmly planted on the floor of the dungeon, the knife clutched closely in his hand, and every muscle ready for the desperate duel.

If Red Cloud could see in the dark as he had boasted, and his manner of frustrating Merle's escape seemed to confirm his words would he not steal a march on the Californian and gain a sudden victory?

Captain Merle resolved not to speak, as his voice would only reveal his whereabouts to the Indian foe.

Suddenly a pebble rolled across the floor and struck Monterey's foot.

It was a simple incident, but it told the Californian a great deal.

The red-skin had mounted the stone pile, and was trying to escape.

With a half-spoken oath, Captain Merle dashed forward, and his left hand came in contact with a naked body.

Then he was thrown away.

"Stand off!" cried a voice. "Red Cloud will demolish the stones so Merle cannot escape."

"Good!" was the response. "That is just what I want."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STRUGGLE.

A DUEL in the dark, and under circumstances like those we have just detailed, was apt to be fought to the death.

Rendered desperate by the treachery of the man whom he had followed oath-bound from Frisco, Merle Monterey was as eager for the combat as a man could well be.

He felt that he could not escape from the pit of the Sierras without finishing the Indian, and he was not the man to underestimate the task before him.

So when Red Cloud told him that he had destroyed the pyramid of stones for the purpose of forcing the duel to a desperate issue, he braced himself for the ordeal, and waited for an onset which he believed was close at hand.

"What thinks Merle, the gold-hunter, now?" suddenly came a voice from the darkness before him. "Does he wish he had not left the talking paper in pieces at his feet?"

"Aha! you read it, then?" answered Merle. "I see now that you got your information by putting the fragments together."

A low laugh was the reply.

"I did not think of that at the time, but never mind," continued the leader of the Silent Six. "We are not here to argue that point. I discover that you want no Merle Monterey in your path when you turn your face toward Frisco with the key to the lost mine in your possession. You had to kill for the diagram, Red Cloud. Do you expect to use your knife again to finish up the job?"

"Let the issue of the fight in the dark speak for Talbot's Indian spy."

"I am content," and Merle stepped aside as he shut his teeth, and seemed to count his heart-throbs in the gloom.

He tried his best to locate his wiry antagonist while he spoke, but the cavern did not convey sound perfectly, and he was obliged to give up the attempt.

"I think I know where the red wolf is," he thought, "but I am not sure enough to try to take him unawares. I don't want to stand here waiting till one's nerves get out of fix. Is Red Cloud of the same notion?"

That very second Captain Merle heard behind him a step that almost rivaled the silky tread of the sneaking leopard.

It was not repeated; but once was enough for him.

He turned with his knife uplifted and held his breath.

Something seemed to tell him that the Indian was directly in his front and about to renew the attack.

"Try it," said Merle to himself. "Throw yourself against me as I am now. Red Cloud, and feel the death hand of Merle of Monterey!"

He took one step aside as he finished, in after years he could not tell why, and just then a body

shot past him like a charge thrown from a catapult.

The Indian grazed the sport's arm, and Merle as he wheeled toward the wall in his rear heard the landing after the spring in the dark.

By the narrowest chance Red Cloud had missed his foe.

"Now for it—now for the tussle in dead earnest," exclaimed Captain Merle. "The failure will exasperate the red-skin; the tiger will be back here in a second. He has lost strength, thank Heaven! I am in luck."

The Californian did not miscalculate.

If he could have pierced the gloom with those keen eyes of his, he could have seen the maddest Indian he had ever met.

Red Cloud thought his enemy directly in his path when he sprung forward, his left hand darting straight toward the spot where he expected to find a human throat, and the tawny fingers of his right wound around the hilt of his deadly dagger.

For the Indian to fail was to enrage him beyond endurance. His foe had eluded him; he had not been found in his path. Something had intervened to save Merle from the knife of Talbot's tigerish Klamath.

But Red Cloud was not to be baffled by the non-success of his leap.

When he struck the ground some distance beyond Captain Merle, he whirled immediately to try again.

If he had seen the white man on two occasions hanging along the wall of the cavern, why could he not see him now?

This question occurred to Merle the gold-hunter.

"Fudge! Red Cloud found me with his ears," he concluded. "He cannot see in darkness like this. The best owl in the Sierras would be baffled here."

This was true.

Hard upon Captain Merle's thoughts came a second step like the one which had warned him a few moments before.

This time it was in his front and just where he expected to hear from Red Cloud.

Monterey did not step aside as he had just done, thereby, perhaps, saving his life.

He invited the close contest by remaining in his tracks.

Suddenly he was touched, not impulsively as by a hand darting eagerly forward, but softly like a person feeling in the dark.

Despite his coolness, Merle drew back at the touch. The Indian seemed to do the same.

Three seconds had not passed ere a hand fell against Merle in no feeling manner.

It was accompanied by a clutch which he shook off, only to have it followed up by another which opened the grapple of life or death.

In another twinkling the duelists came together!

"Red Cloud has found Captain Merle," spoke a voice in undisguised tones of glee, and then the 'Frisco sport threw up his arm and forced off the hand that seemed to sink four fingers into his shoulder.

"Yes, you have found the man you may not want to keep," he hissed back, and then, shifting his left hand suddenly to where he found a stretch of unprotected throat, he bore the red-skin back and struck three blows in startling succession!

The resistance to his knife told Captain Merle that he had driven it into living flesh, and the warm tide that spurted over his hand after the third blow sent through his heart a thrill of insane delight.

Something, the mad blows, perhaps, tore the hand from his shoulder, and then several inches of cold steel passed along his cheek.

The hand at the hilt of the dagger hurled him back, but not far enough to break his hold on the throat he had found.

Again he rushed to the attack, intent on sending his knife back to the place it had found a few moments before, but he was met by two blows, one of which sent a poignant pain through his shoulder, and the other, meeting him halfway, separated him from his enemy.

These events, following each other in rapid succession, did not fill the combined space of five seconds.

Captain Merle stood erect alone once more.

Where Red Cloud was he did not know.

"Have you got enough?" he asked, sending his voice throughout the dungeon. "Does the coward of the Klamath creep away after a little tussle like that?"

There was not the semblance of a reply.

"Mebbe I have finished the traitor," thought Merle. "I know I found Injun meat with my three strokes, but with what result I cannot tell."

Then for several minutes he waited for another onset, waited with a moist knife in one hand, and with blood trickling down the arm leading to the other.

It was some time before Captain Merle left his tracks, and then he did not advance far.

He halted a short distance from the spot and explored the ground around him.

His hand touched nothing.

"Where is my red Greaser?" he asked himself in amazement.

"What has become of the red-skin who expects to win Medora of 'Frisco?"

He advanced again; still no Red Cloud.

To say that Captain Merle was nonplused would not express the truth.

By degrees he enlarged the circle of his observations in the dark.

He felt his way over the floor of the cavern, expecting every moment to encounter his old foe, but he failed to touch the oiled skin of the Klamath.

All at once Captain Merle came in contact with a warm substance on the wall of the dungeon.

Experience told him instinctively what it was.

Blood!

Moving his hands about he found more. There seemed to be a trail of blood leading overhead through the dark.

Had Red Cloud escaped?

"I doubt whether a panther could leap to the top of the wall," thought Merle. "The stones could not have he ped him for he scattered them before the duel. One thing is certain, though; I have lost an Indian scalp."

If the Klamath had reached the top by a spring that was most marvelous under the circumstances, it was more than Captain Merle thought himself able to do.

He searched the cave anew, but found nothing beyond the blood-trail on the wall.

"I'll follow," said he. "I have said that Red Cloud should have a White Satan on his track, and so he shall. I am the man who is to report to Talbot of 'Frisco."

Merle had to have recourse to the pyramid of stones. He gathered them together once more and piled them against the wall, then he mounted to the top as he had done on two former occasions and eagerly clutched the rough fringe of the cavern.

This time there were no red hands to tear his loose, and with an effort he drew himself up and rested at last in a dark passage beyond the death-trap of the Sierras!

Of course Captain Merle inhaled with joy the fresher air that met him in the new quarters.

After awhile he pushed forward and at last saw a ray of light that parted his lips in an exclamation of triumph.

A minute later the leader of the Silent Six stood in a well-lighted corridor with the odor of mountain pines about him, and the light of day bathing his face.

He did not know where he was.

"I didn't come into the trap by this route," cried Merle, as he forced his body through a narrow opening to emerge at length among a lot of shrubbery. "But no difference so long as I'm out of the mouth of hell. Now, Red Cloud, my tiger of the dark, where are you?"

There was no reply to the eager inquiry, no voice of the guide invited the Californian sport to another duel or threatened vengeance, and Merle heard his own words die away without an echo.

He noticed by the sun that he had emerged from the cavern about midway between noon and sunset, and he began to inspect his surroundings in hopes of finding a trail to his companions—the brotherhood of the Silent Six.

At length he spied a peculiar stain on a cast-off cone.

Stooping quickly, he found it to be blood.

"Aha! the Indian is ahead of me!" cried Merle, throwing a sharp look forward. "It may be that I will have to meet the buyer of Medora again."

He looked in vain for another drop of blood, but found none, and at last, giving up the search, he turned to seek his pards, who may have felt during his absence the teeth of the red hyena.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SLEUTH'S SUCCESS.

LUCKLESS LUKE in the exclusive camp of Blister City excited but little comment among the strange pards of the Eternal League.

If Saturn, the suspicious, had been at home, the busted gold-hunter might have been subjected to a close surveillance, but, as we know, he was on the road to 'Frisco, sent off with sealed orders by Trinidad Tom.

After his interview with the boss of the League, Luckless Luke, instead of proceeding to Old Resolute's resort as he had announced his intention of doing, withdrew a short distance from the cabin and watched the door with the eye of a sleuth till Captain Trinidad came out.

When the giant figure of Trinidad appeared and started off toward the mountains that rose high above the western boundary of Blister City, he was followed by the busted miner.

Trinidad Tom soon disappeared, and so did the watch-dog at his heels.

In an hour's time the giant came back, but Luckless Luke was no longer in his wake.

Let us see what became of the vagabond gold-hunter.

"I think I struck a lead in Trinidad's shanty," murmured Luke with a grin, as he followed the boss of Blister from camp, and saw him plunge into the shadows of the mountains. "I went just far enough to give me a clew, and he did

not suspect. Trinidad is gold-greedy like nearly all his kind, but there is another motive behind it all. Saturn has turned traitor and has been outlawed, so they say, and so the men believe. But is it true? What would induce Saturn to play a hand of this kind—to desert Meta, the angel of the camp? It is false! Saturn is no traitor. The peculiar pard of Blister has not run away. I see the fine hand of Captain Trinidad in the scheme. The boss of Blister is a cool one. He is playing for booty and beauty. It is plain to me. He is ready to break the Eternal League at any time. Now, what have I to do? I want to know what they did with Jackson Janes, the young man who would not join the order. He disappeared immediately after his refusal. Did the League carry out the code on him? I say no."

Thus spoke the man who had dogged Captain Trinidad's steps from the very door of his shanty to the ghostly hills that overshadowed the camp.

In a little while he disappeared himself.

Did he know that Blister City had found some gold in No-Gold Land? Was he aware that near the camp existed several mines from which the stalwart pards of the Eternal League took ore enough to supply all their wants?

At any rate, he stood ere long in a dark corridor, which, if he was a real miner, he knew must lead to a mine.

The very stillness of death pervaded the place, and the darkness almost tangible.

Luckless Luke hugged the rocky wall, while something with a human step went past.

It was not a bat-like inhabitant of the uncanny place.

A smile passed over the miner's face as the step disappeared down the chamber, and when it had ceased to be heard, he went in the opposite direction.

"Something important brought you to this place, Captain Trinidad," said he. "If I had not come to Blister City, you would not have made the trip to this hole in the ground at this time. So much for the pretty stories you heard awhile ago from Luckless Luke. Some very old fish are caught with very common bait sometimes."

Ten minutes later Luckless Luke was feeling over the edge of a well with his hands and debating in his mind the distance to the ground below.

It might be a dozen feet, it might be fifty.

At length he detached a stone from the wall at his right, and dropped it into the gloom.

It struck with a far-away sound.

"Too far to drop," said Luckless Luke aloud.

"It isn't far," came the response from below, in a tone that startled him.

The miner leaned forward again.

"It can't be more than ten feet," resumed the same voice. "The walls are smooth and I cannot reach the top."

"Who are you?"

"Jackson Janes, the doomed prisoner of the tiger pards of Blister City."

The luckless prospector gave utterance to an ejaculation of satisfaction.

"Are you free?" he asked.

"Free?" was the echo in a sarcastic voice. "Yes, as free as the beast chained to the bars of his cage!"

The next moment the body of Luckless Luke was hanging over the edge of the wall.

"It is ten feet, you say?" he sent down to the man he could not see.

"Not more than that, I think; but—"

"I'm coming, then!" And then came the sound of a man landing on the unyielding floor of the mountain prisoner.

"Are you safe?" asked the anxious voice of Blister City's captive.

"Always safe!" was the prompt reply.

A moment later the hands of Luckless Luke found other hands in that subterranean gloom, and then he said eagerly:

"Why did they not carry out the code on you, young man?"

"I can hardly tell you why they did not. I am here, you see, still alive, but fastened to a wall of adamant. This is the work of the Eternal League of the Sierra Nevada."

"You utterly refused to join the brotherhood?"

"I did. Why should I coop myself up in No-Gold Land the rest of my natural life? I did not seek this country for a purpose of this kind. But you have not told me who you are. I only know that you do not belong to Blister City."

"I am Sunshine Sam," replied the miner, as his hand seemed to tighten on the wrist it clutched.

"The detective!—the man Meta told me about before the pards swooped down upon me like a lot of eagles!"

Yes, Captain Coldgrip's pupil, and, they say, a chip of the old block; but never mind that. Haven't you just had a visitor?"

"I have had a caller."

"Trinidad Tom?"

"Yes."

"What did he want to know?"

"A great deal that was a revelation to me," was the response. "He seemed to believe that I am the possessor of a bonanza secret which I

obtained from a person called Noland. Truth to tell, Sunshine Sam, I never heard of this man Noland before I struck Blister City. Who put these strange ideas into Trinidad Tom's head?"

A laugh was the answer.

"What if I am the guilty person?" asked Sam. "You?"

"Ay, I am the man. I spun a pretty yarn for Captain Trinidad just to get him to lead me to you if the League had spared you, and I guess I didn't spin it in vain. It would have done you good to have seen the big boss of Blister take the whole story in while I rattled away, with a bottle of smuggled wine at my elbow. You may have heard that the pards of Blister hanged for cheating a man called Noland."

"I know that."

"And that he is supposed to have had with him a golden secret which afterward cost Moccasin Monte his life?"

"Yes, yes."

"You must know also since Trinidad Tom's visit to you that somebody wants that secret."

"Captain Trinidad wants it himself."

"Of course. You told him, of course, that you knew nothing?"

"I could tell him nothing else and speak the truth."

"What did he do?"

"Held a watch in one hand and a revolver in the other, and threatened to scatter my brains over this wall unless I revealed the secret. He did not do it though," and the young Californian laughed. "Captain Trinidad went away growling, and swearing that he would have the secret if it cost the best blood in No-Gold Land."

"Left in high dungeon, eh?" cried Sunshine Sam who had not hesitated to doff in the youth's presence the clever disguise of Luckless Luke. "I could not help getting you into the trouble caused by Trinidad's visit. I had undertaken a commission to find you."

"Who gave it?" asked the youth in tones that displayed much eagerness.

"Can you not guess?"

"Was it the girl?"

"It was Meta."

"Who is Meta?"

The inquiry seemed to surprise the detective.

"Meta is the Angel of Blister City," he replied.

"Nothing more?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"Not yet."

The following moment a match flared up above Sunshine Sam's hand, and for the first time he saw the stout cords that held Jackson Janes to an iron ring affixed to a heavy staple in the solid rock.

His arms were bound to his sides, but the rope was of sufficient length to let him seek a cot a few feet from the ring.

"They fixed you here to stay," exclaimed Sam, when he had inspected the prisoner's condition.

"That was the sentence—to die here a slow, lingering death by starvation in the darkness of this underground dungeon. The majority of the League voted for a doom of this kind. The others wanted a swift death by the revolver."

"What was Trinidad for?"

"For the slow death. Saturn wanted the other punishment."

"I thought so," cried Sam. "Well, we will play a little hand now against the League of Blister. In the first place, though, what did Trinidad offer you for the secret he supposed you possessed?"

"Freedom."

"He was willing to break the code himself?"

"He was."

Sunshine Sam said no more, but produced a knife and cut the cords close to the ring in the wall.

As Jackson Janes stepped forward, released, an exclamation of triumph parted his lips.

"I shall pay the villains back for this!" said he. "A bonanza secret did not bring me into this country, though hidden wealth is indirectly connected with my mission."

"What do you mean?"

"I can tell you, Sunshine Sam. I am searching for Nathan's lost child."

"Nathan's? Who is Nathan?"

"He is a man who is confined to his bed in 'Frisco by a peculiar disease that is slowly taking his life. At one time he was a miner, and was one of a party that rediscovered an old mine of fabulous wealth somewhere in the Sierras. He was accompanied by his daughter, a very little child at the time. The camp, built on the site of the mine, was attacked by the Indians, and destroyed. Nathan survived, but lost his memory for years by a wound on the head. Some consider him deranged to-day, but I do not. I took an oath at his bedside to devote my life to him—to search the Sierras for a trace of the lost daughter whom he believes must exist somewhere."

"Well," smiled Sam, "what have you discovered so far?"

"A lot of mountain tigers with a strange code."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"But you have discovered Meta."

"Oh, yes—Meta," was the response. "She belongs to the League with the rest."

"Certainly. The girl could not do otherwise and breathe the air she does. So you haven't discovered a clew to Nathan's lost child?"

"Not yet, but I have not given up the hunt. I am not that kind," added the young man.

"You have been plain with me, Sunshine Sam. Let me return the compliment. I am not Jackson Janes, but Claude Dumont."

The detective started.

"Well, Claude," he replied, "I think we can work together. You want to find Nathan's child; I am after the bonanza."

"You?" exclaimed the youth. "Are you Mark Talbot's man?"

"Not yet!" laughed Sam.

"Have you seen the Indian?"

"What Indian?"

"Red Cloud. He dropped from the tree in front of Nathan's house the night I took my oath. That red-skin is Talbot's tool."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him afterward emerge from the nabob's palace."

"Ha! We must watch the savage. He is more in this mountain game than you think him, Claude. While we are in the land of the Eternal League, we must not lose sight of Red Cloud."

"Is he really in Mark Talbot's pay?"

"He is, but you cannot guess what he is to receive for the key to the lost bonanza."

"No."

"Medora Talbot is to become his wife."

Claude Dumont uttered a cry of startling surprise.

"Impossible!" cried he. "Talbot would not go that far—"

"He has," said Sunshine Sam through his teeth. "But wait—wait, I say. The goods have not been delivered. And, as my name is Sunshine Sam, they shall not be! I left the Indian's trail to discover you, and, having succeeded, I can go back to it."

"What shall I do?"

"Remain here and fight Trinidad and his brethren, if you like," and though Sam laughed, he saw no responsive mirth on Dumont's face.

CHAPTER XXV.

NEMESIS IN THE SADDLE.

"SEALED orders, eh? What's on the inside? By gracious! I'd like to know."

A horse seemed to be picking his way over an elevated mountain trail across which moonlight and shadow alternated like the colors of a panorama.

While the rider spoke as above, he held between him and the moon a small packet not larger than an envelope, but composed of brown paper, and somewhat thick.

A dark hat with a wide felt brim was set back on the man's head displaying a bronze face lit up by a pair of eyes filled with curiosity.

Need we name the man after this?—Need we call him Saturn of Blister City?

The hidden capital of No-Gold Land was far behind him. He had put many miles between him and Trinidad Tom since receiving the command which had sent him down the trail which if followed to the end, would land him in San Francisco.

About the sealed orders Saturn had all the curiosity of a woman.

What did they say? And why was the seal to remain unbroken until he had reached the city of the American nabobs?

Since leaving Blister, Saturn had done more "tall thinking" as the Western phrase goes.

And for him to think as he could think when alone was for him to become very eager to see beyond the waxen seal that shone in the moonlight.

More than once Saturn had looked at the packet, and had put it back in his bosom, only to take it out again, and give it another inspection.

It was a poor way to resist temptation; but the peculiar tough of Blister, Meta's self-appointed guardian if nothing more, could not help it.

This last time he went further with it than before.

He fingered the seal to see if it could not be raised and replaced.

Saturn let his horse walk leisurely over the rough trail, and the animal was not in any hurry.

"Why not?" Saturn asked himself with his eyes still fastened on the packet. "Why does he send me to 'Frisco so sudden? I know he says that I am to beat over the mountains the man who killed Monte. Is that true? He more than intimated that the assassin came direct from Mark Talbot, the gold-bug there. Am I to play avenger in 'Frisco? Is that what these sealed orders amount to? Hang it all! I'm going to see. It's not the first time the thing's been done, and how will Captain Trinidad know

that I did not open 'em at the proper time and place?"

Saturn checked his steed with a word as his conscience let him arrive at this conclusion, and the next moment he had lifted the red wax seal with the point of his bowie.

Opening the paper before him he saw a lot of writing which he could not make out in the moonlight, and he was forced to have recourse to a match which he struck across his saddle-bow.

"Jehosaphat! sealed orders with a vengeance!" cried Saturn, looking up with consternation on his face. "Trinidad had confidence enough in me to think that I wouldn't tamper with these ar' times when man may mistrust man. I should think he didn't want me to read this till I had reached 'Frisco!"

With the aid of his lucifers Saturn had fully mastered Trinidad Tom's letter. It ran as follows:

"CAPTAIN SATURN:—You will find 'Frisco the safest place for yourself just now. When you read this the men of the Eternal League will look upon you as a traitor, and the death sentence against you will be nailed to the decree post in the square. Every mother's son of them will believe you guilty of the double crime of treachery and desertion, and you will be treated with the severity of the code on sight. If you want to hunt the murderer of Moccasin Monte, you can do so beyond the boundaries of our land. You will be hunted yourself to the finish if you ever come back. A word to a man as wise as yourself, Saturn, is sufficient. Remember! 'Frisco is the safest place, CAPTAIN TRINIDAD."

The "sealed orders" seemed to open a mine of startling revelation to Saturn of Blister City.

His eyes got a light they had not held before, and when he had finished reading he crushed the paper in his hand.

"I'm a long way from 'Frisco yet," came over his lips in a hiss. "I'm not half way, Captain Trinidad. When you beat Saturn, you beat your better. To the city of the nabobs now! Never! Don't I know what this means just as well as if you had put it down in black and white before me? It is a fight for Meta, the Angel of Blister, as well as a play for booty. Not another foot toward 'Frisco! What do I care for the decree of outlawry? Posted am I, and sentenced in regular council? It is your work, Captain Trinidad—it is your lie for a purpose. Look out! The boss of Blister City may learn that it is dangerous to send a man to 'Frisco with sealed orders like these!"

The mountain tough turned his horse about, and set his face against Blister City with a show of resolution that would have startled his coolest enemy.

He had lost a good deal of time.

A night and a day had intervened between his departure from Blister and the breaking of the seal.

During much of the time he had not journeyed fast, for a man can think best when he travels leisurely, and Saturn had been busy with the problem which got deeper and deeper until it culminated in the opening of the treacherous command.

His horse responded promptly to the spur that urged him over the trail he had traversed. He seemed to share his rider's eagerness to get back to the exclusive community in the heart of the Sierras.

Saturn laughed to himself sometimes when he thought of Trinidad Tom imagining him pushing on toward 'Frisco with the sealed packet underneath his coarse shirt.

What a fool Captain Trinidad was!

Had he forgotten Saturn's parting words: "If anything happens while I'm gone, I'll settle for it when I come back?"

On, on rode the outlawed lieutenant of the Eternal League over the winding trail of the Sierra Nevada.

Now he disappeared between canyon walls where it took the keenest of eyes to see one's hands before one's face, and now he slowly climbed the elevations, his figure outlined darkly like a mounted ogre against the galaxy of stars.

He kept on until the gray dawn bathed his face. By and by the sun peeped over the edge of his couch and saw Saturn riding sternly toward Blister City and not toward 'Frisco.

It was Nemesis in the saddle.

The time came when this solitary ride of the Californian showed signs of being near its close.

When Saturn rose suddenly in the stirrups he had kept all night with the pertinacity of perseverance, and shaded his eyes with a brown hand while a meaning smile played with his lips, it was evident that the man was nearing his goal.

"The boundary!" he exclaimed, glancing at two singular-looking rocks at the trailside. "I am back, Captain Trinidad. The outlaw has come home!"

Then he rode on and on with a settled expression of countenance, but there remained in his eye the look of eagerness which came there when he turned his horse toward Blister City.

"I wonder if they're looking for me?" he asked himself in audible tones. "Of course not," he answered. "Why should they? Ain't I on the road to 'Frisco to find the man who

killed Monte because he bought the dead man's duds? Of course I am!"

At length Saturn rode through a little gulch, hardly a canyon, for the walls were not high enough to give it that dignified name, and a look brought the grouped roofs of Blister City into full view.

Then the sport of the Sierra drew a heavy six-shooter, and looked at its chambers with the eye of the practiced shot.

"Almost there, Swiftiness," he said, smoothing the silky neck of the steed which had responded to his orders without a sign of fatigue. "Now let us show the fools that it is one thing to outlaw a man with a lie, but another to win the game with one play."

Blister City lay quietly in the sunlight that seemed to slant down the mountains and touch it tenderly.

So busy were its denizens at Old Resolute's and elsewhere that, strange to relate, no one saw the horseman who rode down the street, and drew rein in front of the stout "decree post" in the middle of the square.

"Outlawed, sure enough!" exclaimed the man in the saddle as his eyes took in the notice which hands as dark as his had recently nailed to the wood. "To be hunted down for treason and desertion, and to be shot on sight! Decreed by the Eternal League in council, and signed by Captain Trinidad!"

Then he leaned back in his saddle and almost lost his hat as he broke out into a defiant laugh loud enough to be heard half over the mountain camp.

"I'm back, gentlemen of the League!" rung from his throat. "All men sent to 'Frisco don't go that! Whar is the viper of Blister City? Whoopee! Trot out Captain Trinidad if he hasn't sneaked off like a coward!"

The next second, as if in response to his defiance, the door of the Sierra bar opened at one side of the square, and exclamations of surprise saluted Saturn as he looked and saw half a dozen faces struck pale with wonder.

"The traitor an' deserter is back," he shouted to them, as he drew the weapon he had inspected with such care on the homeward trail. "Whar is the boss liar and schemer of Blister? I call in a loud voice for Trinidad Tom of the Eternal League. The outlawed wants 'im!"

"Here he is!"

The sudden sweep of giant arms seemed to divide the men at the door of the saloon, and with a spring, almost too startling to be human, the stalwart figure of Captain Trinidad landed in the open space before the door.

The rivals of the Sierra were face to face.

"To be shot on sight! You know the code!" hissed Trinidad throwing up the hand that hung at his side.

At the same instant a hand rose above the polished horn of Saturn's saddle.

The men in the door shrunk back instinctively for the two captains were straight ahead.

Then out on the cool air rung two shots almost blending into one.

Captain Trinidad came back toward the bar, and the following moment, with a cry which was a curse as well, his burly figure pitched across the step!

And those who looked away saw the outlaw of Blister leaning through the smoke of his six-shooter with sardonic triumph devouring his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FACE AT THE DOOR.

Of course the unexpected duel between the two captains was a startling episode even in rough-and-ready Blister City.

Through the smoke of the deadly pistol clutched still by the man who had fired the certain shot, was seen the cool face of the victor.

Trinidad Tom's athletic figure blockaded the door, and the roughs who looked at it in mute astonishment saw the closed hands and the semblance of pain upon the tensely-drawn visage.

"Gents o' Blister, the outlaw is back. When you want him you won't have to look far!" suddenly resumed the man in the saddle.

Then the crowd saw Saturn wheel his horse and ride slowly away with a parting glance at the mountain schemer who had dropped at the crack of his revolver.

"Take care of Cap'n Trinidad first," spoke some one. "Saturn's eyes say thet he isn't goin' far."

They picked the boss of Blister up and carried him into the bar-room where they put him down on a hastily-thrown blanket, and Old Resolute dashed some whisky into his mouth.

As for Saturn, he rode away unmolested, and did not stop until he reached Meta's cabin, in front of which he slid from the saddle and went forward.

A moment afterward he pushed open the door and confronted the angel of the camp, whose eyes seemed to dilate with surprise at sight of him.

"Didn't look for me, eh?" coldly smiled Saturn, folding his arms and leaning against the unplanned jamb.

"No. Trinidad said—"

The girl seemed to have her sentence broken by the look he gave her at mention of his rival's name.

"Why don't you go on?" he asked. "What did he say?"

"Ah! you know," cried Meta. "You have seen Captain Trinidad. Tell me, Saturn. What meant the shooting awhile ago?"

"It meant this, girl," and Saturn's hands opened his shirt front as he leaned forward, and Meta saw blood on his naked breast.

For a moment a look of horror overspread the girl's face, and from the startling sight she looked into Saturn's eyes.

"You have fought!" she exclaimed. "My God! could you not have settled it some other way?"

"No!" came through the Sierra captain's teeth. "Thar war but one way to settle it like men! Captain Trinidad tumbled head-foremost into Old Resolute's. I guess he's thar yet."

"Merciful heavens! What brought this about?"

"He sent me to 'Frisco."

"Sent you? Why, the pards of the League understand that you went off of your own accord—"

"That I am traitor and deserter, eh?" laughed Saturn.

"You are posted."

"Yes. I read the decree just before we met."

"And you have killed Trinidad?"

"It isn't my fault if he isn't dead."

Meta seemed to draw back from the man.

"I regret this; from the bottom of my heart I am sorry," said she. "Are you not afraid of the sequel?"

"Would I be here talking to you if I were?" he asked quickly, and at the same time he threw a rapid glance toward the door. "I know what you are thinking about, Meta. More bloody work!"

"It is bound to come if you remain."

He took one step forward and covered the distance between himself and the girl.

"What has Captain Trinidad said to you since I went away?" he cried looking down into her face with sternness.

"Nothing, Saturn."

"Don't tell me that, Meta. He has been here?"

"In my house?"

"Yes."

"I have not seen him here."

"Is this truth, girl?"

"As I live, it is!"

Honesty was depicted on every lineament of the beautiful face that confronted Saturn the sport.

"Well, I was sent away because of you. I was branded traitor and deserter and sentenced by the League because you are Queen of Blister City."

"It can't be! I don't see why it should be so."

"You don't eh?" grinned Saturn. "You don't even think that your pretty face cannot have influenced Captain Trinidad?"

Meta's answer was a singular cry.

"My God, Saturn! you don't mean to tell me that Captain Trinidad loves me?"

"That is it! that is it!" cried Saturn. "By Jove! I never fully suspected the truth till I opened his message on the 'Frisco trail, and not where he thought I would open it—in the city of the nabobs. Yes, Meta, Captain Trinidad thinks as much of beauty as he does of booty. He wanted Saturn out of his way, hence the sending away and the paper on the decree post in the Square."

"I can't believe all this," was the response, and for several seconds the Angel of Blister City stared almost blankly into the tough's face.

He let her have her look out, and even seemed to enjoy her consternation and incredulity.

Meta now saw herself in a light she had never seen herself in before. She never thought that Saturn's kindness and assiduousness in her behalf meant anything more than friendship, nor had she suspected the revelation just made concerning Captain Trinidad.

Is was startling to the girl.

"Let's go back—back beyond to-day," Saturn abruptly continued. "You never knew just how you came to fall into the care of the pards of Blister."

"I know nothing beyond the vague hints you have dropped from time to time."

"Hints, eh? You don't think, Meta, that you're any more than a waif?"

"Why should I? You must know more about me than I know myself."

She saw a faint smile—a curious puzzling smile—gather at the corners of Saturn's lips.

"Well, you are a waif—nothing else," said he. "I am responsible for your being here."

"I have suspected that all along."

"You have won the right to the title of Queen of Blister City; but you've no right to keep it. I mean you are really more than that."

"I don't know."

"Well, I do!" ejaculated Saturn. "When it comes to you, Meta, I know more than any living man."

"A secret, is it?" exclaimed Meta.

"I've kept it as such these many years. Do you want me to divulge it now?"

"I would like to know it, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"I want the revelation to leave me at liberty to go or stay."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Saturn. "You forget that no member of the Eternal League can cross the boundary-line without permission. You belong to the League, girl."

"So I do, but if I thought I should go, do you think the code would keep me back?"

There was a flash in the depths of Meta's eyes while her lips pronounced her answer.

"Then, by Jericho! I won't go any further!" burst forth the Blister City sport. "Besides, this is not the time for the revelation."

"Keep it, then. I can wait."

"You may have to wait a long time."

"I have waited all my life already."

Saturn drew back and looked steadily at her for a few moments.

"Has the detective been back?" he asked.

"No."

"You are certain of it, Meta?"

"I have not seen him."

"Nor the young man from 'Frisco?"

"Of course not. How could he come when the League dealt with him, as you say, according to the code?"

"Let him stay, then! Meta, in case of a contest, where will you stand—with Saturn or with the camp?"

"Then you are going to stay?"

Once more, as she had seen before, the old flashes of defiance and courage came up in Saturn's eyes.

"I can't be driven!" cried he. "I did not ride back over the mountains to kill my man and then sneak like a coward from camp. No! that is not Saturn; nor is it the man who has faced death a thousand times among the bonanza hills. Answer me now, Meta; but don't speak before you have made up your mind. You stand between Saturn and Blister City. Which way will you step?"

The girl stood silent before the sport, and heard almost the beatings of her own heart as the moments flitted by.

Never before had she been placed in such a dilemma.

She went rapidly back over the last events in camp-life as she understood them from Saturn's story.

Of course the death of Trinidad would set the camp on edge against his slayer, and Saturn the outlawed would be hunted down by the banded toughs of the Sierra Nevadas.

Had he a right to expect her to unite her fortunes with his at this crisis? Why should she take sides in the drama which had to come, and that very soon?

Meta struggled with the problem while Saturn watched her and waited for the end.

All at once the latch of the cabin door clicked, and as the California tough turned, he gripped the ever-ready six-shooter which had just startled the pards of the camp.

It was a moment of suspense for the inmates of the cabin.

Following the lifting of the latch, the door opened, and Saturn, instead of seeing the face of a Blister City pard, saw a figure strange to him.

Meta knew the man at once. It was Luckless Luke.

"Oh, I beg pardon!" exclaimed the caller, glancing from the girl to Saturn, who was already looking at him with his keen suspicious eyes.

He drew back, shutting the door after him, and vanished.

"Who is that man?" asked Saturn, wheeling upon Meta, who flushed at his look.

"A broken miner, called Luckless Luke."

"When did he come?"

"Since you went away."

"Of course. He wasn't here in that disguise when I rode off like a fool on a fool's errand. Luckless Luke, eh?"

"Yes."

"What brought him to Blister?"

"I don't know," and Meta did not, for as yet Luckless Luke to her was not Sunshine Sam the detective.

Saturn stepped to the little window beside the door and followed the retreating figure with a look that excited the girl's curiosity.

"A broken miner, hey?" she heard his lips unconsciously speak aloud. "I'm no infant when it comes to a few things. More than one thing has happened since I went off. Meta?"

He whirled upon the girl and throwing out his hand caught her arm and drew her to him.

"Listen to me," he went on, looking down into her face. "You need not decide just now between Saturn and Blister City. You can make up your mind *after awhile*. If you should decide now, you might regret your choice. I don't want to entangle you. Remember that I am the only man who holds the secret. I don't care whom others think you are. I know. Now stand aside and let Blister and I decide who shall be master."

Meta was pushed away at the end of his speech, and when she recovered and bounded

forward to have the last word, the shutting of the door and the drop of the latch told her that Saturn was gone!

"Merciful God! why was I ever placed here?" she exclaimed. "Am I to decide between two men tigers like Trinidad Tom and Saturn? Saturn the jealous has befriended me! Perhaps I owe my very existence to him. Who knows? Yet, I am bound to the pards of Blister City—bound with an oath that makes me shudder when I recall it. When can I make up my mind and choose? I—wish—oh heaven!—I—wish—I had—never—been—born!" and with a strange wail that seemed torn from her heart, Meta the mysterious threw herself upon her couch and buried her face in her hands.

The girl was sorely troubled.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OLD PARDS MEET.

"THAT must be the town not on Talbot's map. Yonder lies the camp where Red Cloud killed some one for what he calls the key to the lost bonanza of the Sierras. Will I find the trail yonder? Can I afford to ride into the strange camp and proclaim myself—Captain Merle, in the employ of Mark Talbot the gold-bug of 'Frisco? I need not go so far as that perhaps. Circumstances will guide me. Here goes for the unknown capital of No-Gold Land." And the handsome horseman who had been looking down on Blister City from the mouth of an elevated gulch, spurred his beast forward, and approached it with mingled eagerness and curiosity.

It was about the time of Saturn's interview with Meta after the duel in front of Old Resolute's resort, and the sharpest eyes could not have told from outward appearance that blood had just been shed on the square.

We left Captain Merle, it will be remembered, shortly after his escape from the old mine trap into which Red Cloud the Klamath had decoyed him.

He had lost the red-skin's trail as well as that of the four companions, whom he had not seen since his last adventure.

A thousand times almost this question had occurred to him: Was he the last man of the Silent Six?

Now that Red Cloud stood before him in his true character, Merle Monterey was quite ready to believe that the hand of the Indian had finished the careers of his companions.

Nothing was to baffle the gold guide of the Sierras. He was determined to carry out his compact with Mark Talbot, and no hand should come between him and the beautiful white wife waiting for him in 'Frisco.

It need not be written here that Captain Merle had renewed his oath of vengeance scores of times since his escape.

He rode toward Blister City in hopes of discovering something which he could turn to account in the schemes he had decided on.

If he had not found his companions, he had rediscovered the horse which had carried him into the heart of No-Gold Land.

If he was weaponless, he was well-mounted and that was something to him just then.

Captain Merle became an object of interest to a full dozen of dark men before he had advanced half-way down the main street of Blister City.

There was something specially attractive about the handsome long-haired sport, and he was eyed with much interest as he rode on straight toward the silent and watchful group, whose members, with pantaloons in boots and hands on revolvers, never took their eyes off him for a moment.

Merle Monterey studied them also as he rode up, and when he drew rein a few feet from the sett, he touched the brim of his hat and volunteered a salute as he addressed them good-naturedly.

"Good-day, gentlemen of—"

"Blister, sir," finished one of the foremost in the crowd.

"Oho! Blister, eh? A good name for a camp in a good place. It ought to draw here."

Faint smiles greeted the sport's pun, but they immediately vanished.

"I am Merle Monterey," resumed the sport. "My mission here is one of peace so far as Blister and its gentlemen are concerned; but I'm on a trail which may not end pleasantly for the red dog I'd like to catch."

There was a general, though slight, move toward Merle by the crowd.

"Are you a detective?" was the quick interrogative.

"No. That is, I never took to that profession, but I'm something of a man-hunter just now."

"So are we."

The retort was emphasized in a manner that caught Captain Merle's attention.

"Then we ought to join hands," he laughed.

"Do you want the Indian, too?"

"What Injin?"

"Red Cloud."

"We know nothing about an Indian. What did he do?"

"More than you think, perhaps," answered Merle. "Didn't you lose a citizen some time ago?"

"We did. Moccasin Monte war killed."

"For what?"

"We believe for something or other which he bought at auction in a dead man's clothes."

"A bonanza chart, eh?"

"It may have been something o' that sort."

"Was he killed at night?"

"At night, cap'n."

"What kind of a clew did you fellows get?"

"We got none. He didn't leave any."

"I know who killed Monte," said Merle.

"War it the Injun you say you're huntin'?"

"Yes."

"You're sure the slayer warn't white?"

"I am."

"That seems to take it off o' Saturn," and the speaker looked at the men by whom he was surrounded.

"Saturn?" echoed the long-haired sport.

"Who is Saturn?"

"He's the outlawed pard o' Blister—the traitor and deserter who came back when he warn't expected, and tumbled Captain Trinidad headlong across Old Resolute's step."

"When?"

"Just a little while ago."

"To-day?"

"Yes."

"Shot Trinidad dead, did he?"

"You kin go and see, cap'n."

All of a sudden the leader of the Silent Six seemed to take more than a passing interest in the duel in the Square. Perhaps it was the queer name of Trinidad that interested him, perhaps it was something else.

"I'd like to see," he said to the booted pards of Blister City, and the following minute he was being led away by the spokesman of the crowd, who looked meaningfully at his companions as he took his station at the head of Merle's steed.

In a little while Talbot's man was landed at the closed door of a cabin with nothing peculiar in its make up to distinguish it from its neighbors, and Captain Merle saw his guide open the portal with much gentleness.

The 'Frisco sport slid from the saddle and went forward.

"Thar he is," whispered the guide.

Merle leaned across the step and looked into the hut.

"Why, he isn't dead!" he exclaimed, giving the guide a rapid glance.

"Who said he war?" was the response.

Stretched on a rough cot lay the stalwart, almost gigantic figure of Trinidad Tom.

A rolled blanket propped up his head, and a peculiar disorder noticeable about his breast conveyed a suggestion of bandages.

It was a swarthy picture for Captain Merle—the half-darkened interior, the patient on the floor, and the pain-set bronzed face revealed by the light that came in at the door.

Trinidad Tom fixed his eyes on his visitors, but more particularly on Merle of 'Frisco.

"Who is here, Orinoco?" he asked.

"Cap'n Merle he calls himself."

At the same time Talbot's man stepped toward the cot.

"Go away, Orinoco. Let me see this man," continued Trinidad Tom, looking at the sport's guide over his shoulder.

The Blister City pard turned to leave.

"Stay!" cried Tom, lifting his hand. "Where is he now?"

"We've got him treed at Meta's."

"There?" said Trinidad, through his teeth.

"Well, I might have guessed it. Keep him under your eyes. Don't let him get beyond you. Tell the boys that I feel better. It wasn't such a bad shot after all. It might have been worse, Orinoco. I'll see Captain Merle now." And the pard and guide took his leave leaving the two men alone.

For several moments they looked into each other's face.

"There's only one Captain Merle," spoke Trinidad Tom, at length. "But I didn't look for him here."

"Mebbe not. I turn up sometimes where I'm not wanted. It's a peculiar trait of mine."

"Whar you're not wanted, eh? How do you know I don't want you here?"

"Of course I don't just know that, but since you've buried yourself in these mountains with nothing on the maps to mark your living tomb, I have no right to think that you would like visitors."

"That is true, Merle, but you're welcome. What brings you to Blister?"

"A trail."

"A human trail?"

"Yes."

"Did it begin in 'Frisco?—there's where you war the last time I heard of you."

"No; it did not start from there. It was 'gold' when I left the city; it is 'man' now."

"Tell me, Captain Merle. I feel pretty good now if I have the bullet of a traitor somewhere in my breast."

Captain Merle looked at Trinidad Tom with eyes that appeared eager to question him about the cause of his wounding; but he began the story of his adventures since quitting Mark Talbot's palace in San Francisco.

It was strange that these two men, acquainted before the opening of our story, should meet in

the depths of No-Gold Land under such circumstances.

Although Captain Trinidad knew that Merle lived in 'Frisco, the long-haired sport, on the contrary, had lost sight of the boss of Blister City.

The recital of his adventures occupied ten minutes during which time the man on the cot listened with a patience which proclaimed the interest he took in the narrative.

Captain Merle omitted nothing, and Trinidad Tom heard for the first time about the secret compact which was to give Medora Talbot to Red Cloud the red-skin for the key to the lost bonanza of the Sierra Nevada.

"I see more than I ever saw before," remarked Trinidad. "It was the Indian's knife that took Monte's life. He struck for what he thought was the chart to the treasure."

"He found it."

"The real chart?—the true key to the lost bonanza?" exclaimed the wounded man.

"He says so."

"Great heavens! The Indian must not be permitted to make use of it," and the fingers of Trinidad Tom wound themselves about Merle's wrist as they were accustomed to do about the hilt of a bowie. "The secret is in our grasp if we play a good hand. I see! You want to keep the Indian from getting the reward that awaits him in 'Frisco."

"That is it. I have sworn that Red Cloud shall never claim Medora the Beautiful."

"Of course," smiled Trinidad Tom. "I am on my back here, but I am not powerless. In the first place, I want to deal with Saturn. You heard Orinoco say that they have been under guard?"

"I heard his report."

"Well, the traitor first, then the Indian's secret."

Merle drew back and looked at the speaker.

"You think I don't know?" laughed Captain Trinidad. "Wait and see. If the bonanza is what Mark Talbot believes it to be, it is big enough to be divided."

"You can have it all if I can beat the Indian."

"And win the prize yourself, Captain Merle? I thought no beauty could ensnare you."

"Never mind. I have not confessed to being meshed. I want Red Cloud the Indian first. I remember the trap that caught me in the mountains. I think a thousand times an hour of my lost companions. I want the red wolf first of all, I say."

Before Trinidad Tom could reply, a hasty step was heard at the cabin door, and the man called Orinoco reappeared.

"He is out, captain," was the report. "Saturn has left Meta's house. What shall we do?"

Captain Merle saw Trinidad's hands shut convulsively before he spoke again.

"Watch him as before. No! put him under arrest, and take him to the glazed dungeon!" he replied.

The pard withdrew.

"It is a duel to the death," resumed Tom, turning his eyes upon the long-haired sport. "Blister City is too small for Saturn and me. I want it understood—"

The door opened again.

"How is Captain Trinidad?" asked a voice.

"Ha! is that you, Luckless Luke?" called out the wounded sport. "Oh, I'm going to pull through to be the worst pill in the box."

"I'm glad to hear it. I'll drop in again before night," and the face disappeared.

"That's the man who gave me the clew to the secret," said Trinidad Tom, looking at Merle, who was watching the retreating figure from the window.

"What? That man give you a clew?" cried Merle, wheeling upon Captain Tom. "I've heard his voice under circumstances which will never let me forget it. Luckless Luke, eh? Why, that man must be Sunshine Sam, a detective."

Trinidad Tom looked blank.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

META'S DECISION.

"I CANNOT believe it," Captain Trinidad went on when he had caught his breath after his ejaculation. "Sunshine Sam has been here. He came in his true character and undisguised. He agreed to help us find the person who killed Monte—the assassin whom you believe to be Red Cloud, the Indian. Now you call the broken miner Luckless Luke, Sunshine Sam. I repeat, Captain Merle, that the man who just went away gave me a clew to the lost mine."

"I can't help it," answered Merle, with the air of a man not to be put off thus. "I saw Captain Coldgrip and Sunshine Sam the time they played their cool hand in Deadwood not very long ago. When I once hear a voice under peculiar circumstances I never forget it. You may call that man Luckless Luke, and he may be willing to swear himself through as such a person, but I know that Sunshine Sam, the chip of the old block, has just left this cabin."

"Why does he give me the clew?"

"I know nothing about that. Are you certain he gave you the right one?"

"I am convinced of the fact."

"Have you tried to follow it up?"
 "I have."
 "With what result?"
 "With but little so far. But I will make sealed lips open."
 "Oho!" exclaimed Captain Merle.
 "There are lips to part, eh?"
 "Yes."
 "I thought Luckless Luke gave you a clew?"
 "He did, I tell you," persisted Trinidad. "I have only to starve a certain young man a little to get the secret. You don't know anything about the gold-hunter who appeared in Blister City about the same time with Sunshine Sam."
 "No."

"Then, you have no right to say or think that I am not on the true trail through the detective. We offered to take Jackson Janes into the brotherhood, but he refused, and we had to draw the code on him. He holds the secret—Luckless Luke has convinced me of this. The youth is in my hands, and I will get at his secret by and by."

Once more Captain Merle went to the window and looked out.

Sunshine Sam was gone and the way in front of the cabin to the square was deserted.

"You gave orders for Saturn your enemy to be arrested and taken to the Glazed Dungeon?" he said, coming back to Trinidad.

"I did. It has been accomplished ere this."

"You are going to be master here."

"I am that by election, but I propose to be boss of No-Gold Land in reality. The man sent to 'Frisco may come back, and shoot me down, but he should kill if he wants to play the game through. What would you do with Saturn, Captain Merle?"

"I wouldn't let him go—that is certain," was the answer.

"Let him go?" grinned Trinidad Tom, displaying his teeth in a wolfish smile as he leaned toward the 'Frisco sport. "I used to trap in the Big Horn country, and I never let a wild-cat get away after I had him caught. Saturn is as safe in the Glazed Dungeon as if he were entombed in the heart of Mount Shasta. I am on top now—I—Trinidad Tom, Captain of the Eternal League!"

Merle Monterey sent a longing, half-eager look through the window. The quick eyes of the wounded man saw it.

"Don't let me keep you here," said Tom. "If you go, keep an eye on the man you call Sunshine Sam. As Luckless Luke he is here to play a double hand. He said he would call again before night. He may or may not. If you think proper, Merle, let the fellow know that he can't succeed here as you say he succeeded in Deadwood. I hate these sleuths. I have no use for them any more in Blister!"

Merle Monterey withdrew and left Trinidad Tom on his cot to his reflections.

By the merest chance Saturn's shot fired from the saddle had not put an end to his career, and the powerful physique of the camp boss was likely to pull him through.

Trinidad had made up his mind that he was not going to die. He had resolved against death through clinched teeth and with closed hands, saying that there was too much to live for to die like a dog on the floor of his kennel.

Mark Talbot had a rival for the possession of the lost mine in the person of the boss of Blister, and Captain Trinidad was apt to give the gold-bug considerable trouble.

Trinidad now understood several things he had not perceived before.

Captain Merle's story of Red Cloud's movements had thrown light on Monte's murder, and the wounded sport was certain that the hand of Talbot's red guide and tool had dealt the blow.

What if Red Cloud had found the mine, and was on his way back to his master with the secret!

If Talbot once possessed it, farewell to his (Trinidad's) hopes of reaching the prize.

It was some hours after his departure when Merle came back to the hut.

"Your man is in the dungeon," he reported to the man who met him with a look full of mute questioning.

"That report has been delivered," was the reply. "Tell me about the other one."

"Luckless Luke?"

"Yes."

"He is gone."

Trinidad Tom gave a slight start.

"Do you mean that he has left Blister?"

"I do."

"Why didn't you detain him?" exclaimed Tom.

"When I did not see him go?"

"Pardon me. That is true, Merle. You could not have stopped him. Well, if the detective keeps his distance he will save himself and do me a favor."

"He will remain away unless Red Cloud's trail brings him back to the camp."

"Is he after the Indian?"

"He is. I am now convinced that Sunshine Sam is hunting the mine."

"For Talbot?" cried Trinidad.

"No."

"For whom, then?"

"Probably under the eye of his old master—Captain Coldgrip. At any rate, I am sure he is not in Talbot's employ. The millionaire colonel has but one party in the field, ours."

"The millionaire colonel has enough!" cried Trinidad. "What is Medora like?"

"She is beautiful."

"As pretty as Meta?"

"I have never seen Meta?"

"I forgot. There will be no harm in your seeing her right away, Merle; no harm I say, seeing that you are playing against the Indian for Medora. Go to the tenth cabin from here on the right hand side of the street. Tell Meta that I'm not so bad after all, and come back and draw the line between the two women."

"By Jove! I'll do it!" cried Merle.

"Sound her a little on the sly about Saturn—what he talked about after the duel, and so forth. You can play any hand that suits you, but as you're likely to appear to Meta hereafter as Captain Merle, maybe you'd better be that to her now."

There was an anxious look in Monterey's eyes when he left Trinidad Tom and went toward the tenth cabin on the right.

"I begin to see why the duel was fought," said he to himself. "There's an angel in the case in Blister City just as there is one in 'Frisco. Of course Meta is not as handsome as Medora—there are few women who are—but I will note the contrast and please Trinidad with a report fixed up to suit him."

If Captain Merle could have looked into the tenth cabin while he approached it, he might have caught a glimpse of a pair of glowing eyes already watching him through the window.

"Who is that man and who brings him here?" the girl asked herself. "He is on terms with Captain Trinidad, for he comes straight from his cabin. Maybe I will know before long, as he is coming to see me."

Meta left the window when Captain Merle's destination became known to her, and the next moment raps sounded on the door.

"Come in!" answered the Angel of the secret camp, and the 'Frisco sport, lifting the latch, stood before the girl.

As he crossed the step he doffed his hat, and Meta saw his long hair shake over his shoulders as he inclined his head.

"Too polite," thought the girl. "I must not trust this man. He is a fox in kids, and he comes to me for a purpose which I dare not encourage. No, I won't trust him, since he comes from Captain Trinidad, who outlawed Saturn to carry out his own scheme."

Captain Merle seemed to read the girl's decision in the look she gave him when their eyes met again.

"On her guard," he murmured. "I understand it. By Jericho! I don't wonder at Trinidad Tom playing a desperate hand for a stake like this. Not as pretty as Medora, though, but harder to win, I should think."

"I am from Trinidad, miss," he resumed aloud. "He wants you to know that he is not as badly hurt as was feared. The bullet fired from Saturn's revolver missed the heart it was intended for, and strength and a clear conscience will bring Trinidad through."

"Thanks," bowed Meta while Merle thought he detected a smile for his remark about Captain Tom's "clear conscience."

"If I could have my way there wouldn't be any graveyard for Blister City. Men need not make wolves of themselves just because they don't like one another. I only wish I could have my way."

"It would be best, no doubt, but men must rule. Pardon me, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Merle Monterey."

"From where?" asked the girl mechanically.

"From 'Frisco."

Meta started with a smile.

"Are you, too, on the gold trail?" she exclaimed.

The sport shook his head.

"Then, I behold one person who is not thought to come from Talbot, the bonanza nabob. Mr. Monterey, I wish I could convince some people by telling you that that mine does not exist."

"Ah! do you think so?"

"I believe as much at any rate," and Meta caught Captain Merle's eyes as she spoke. "A month ago Blister City had no thought of the bonanza. Things changed suddenly. A man came here and was hanged, his clothes were brought by Moccasin Monte, and that same night Monte was assassinated. Then came one startling scene after another until all culminated in the duel which nearly cost Captain Trinidad his life. The accursed mine which has turned Mark Talbot's head, is the cause of it all. I wish it had never had an existence even in legend."

"Why not, miss?"

"Can't you see what it has done? I had a friend before the change took place. I was even happy, shut up among the peaks of No-Gold Land, and with the dark-faced members of the Eternal League. My friend is a posted—sentenced man. He came back and shot the captain he once swore to obey. God knows what they have done with Saturn. He has dis-

appeared—like the young man from 'Frisco disappeared because he would not join the brotherhood. I have been asked to choose between Saturn and Blister City—no, between Saturn and Trinidad Tom, because the leader of the League is not dead, nor going to die. I have made up my mind. The workings of a lie have driven me to a decision. When you go back to Captain Trinidad, and he asks you what I have said, as I know he will, tell him that, God helping her, Meta has chosen to stand by Saturn the outlawed!"

Her eyes emphasized her words in a manner not to be misunderstood.

"I don't think you can afford to decide thus, miss," ventured Merle. "My advice would be—"

"Advice?" broke in Meta, starting up. "Did he send you to me to proffer advice? You have unmasked your mission, Captain Merle. I have decided and I retract nothing. I am for Saturn and against his foes! Tell your master this. Go!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SECRET OF THE SIERRAS.

MERLE of 'Frisco did not have to look twice into the eyes that sparkled before him to tell that the fair speaker meant every word she had said.

"I'll deliver the message, miss, but it will not result pleasantly," he replied.

"No matter, deliver it," was the fearless retort. "When it comes to a crisis, and affairs have reached that stage, I am for Saturn—my friend in other days through thick and thin."

"Do you know where Saturn is?"

"He has been escorted to prison, and why? Because when he found himself outlawed by Captain Trinidad and sent away for a sinister purpose, he came back with fire in his heart and sought to pay the villain for his villainy. I don't approve of bloodshed, Captain Merle—I have always lifted my voice for peace in Blister City, but Saturn had such cause that I cannot say that he had not a right to turn his back on 'Frisco."

It was some minutes afterward when Merle Monterey walked from the cabin leaving Meta to herself.

"Trinidad is not going to have a pleasant wooing," he murmured with a smile. "The girl is capable of giving him a good deal of trouble, and I don't want to become mixed up in the affair. She gave me authority to report to Trinidad, but beyond that I don't think I'll go. I won't give any advice, for it wouldn't be taken; I'm quite sure of that."

When Monterey re-entered the wounded man's shanty a pair of keen eyes were instantly riveted on him.

"Well, you saw her?" questioned Captain Trinidad.

"I did."

"Isn't she a beauty?"

"She is entitled to the name you have given her—the Seraph of the Sierras."

"I thought so!" cried Trinidad, his eyes snapping. "I wouldn't be afraid to pit her against your Medora in a contest of beauty. Meta is worth playing your last eagle for."

"Who is she?" asked Merle.

"A waif. I presume Saturn knows something about her—something more than the rest of us know I mean."

"Then, you don't know whose blood she has in her veins?"

"No. What kind of blood do you think it is, Merle? Did you see a display of it?"

The California sport returned a smile as he answered Trinidad.

"She's got spirit, plenty of it, I should say."

"Ha! didn't she receive you politely?"

"Politely enough. She showed her blood when she reeled off the message she sent you."

"Out with it. In Satan's name, why didn't you get to it before this? What does Meta send me Merle?—nothing very congratulatory I judge from your looks."

"Not very, captain. The girl wants it known that she has decided to stand by Saturn."

The black eyes of Trinidad Tom were seen to snap as they dilated.

An oath slipped through his teeth without effort, and his hands shut convulsively.

"For Saturn the outlaw of Blister City?" he exclaimed. "Who asked her to decide?"

"Some one did from her language."

"By heavens! it must have been Saturn himself! We did not cage the bird a minute too soon."

Merle did not reply.

"So she is for the outlawed," continued Trinidad, shutting his eyes an instant while a smile crept into existence at his lips, "I'm glad I sent you to her, Merle. I know something now. I can deal with our camp seraph understandingly. Do you know Bowlder Burt?"

"No."

"Well, you can find him. He is the big man with the red beard, and a drooping shoulder. I want you to take him a message. Of course you will, Captain Merle?"

"Certainly."

Trinidad Tom put a hand beneath his blanket and drew forth several little sheets of paper which at one time had been parts of a diary.

Lying on his back and using the book itself for a desk, he wrote for a moment and folded the sheet.

Then, at his request, Merle lit the lamp and watched him melt a stick of red wax and drop some of it on the fold, making a rough but substantial seal.

"That's the kind o' seal that Saturn broke on the way to 'Frisco," grinned Trinidad, looking up at his companion as he finished the operation. "We seal official documents that way in Blister. It looks like business, and it is little things like these that keep a league together."

The sealed writing was handed to Captain Merle, and he was requested to find the big sport with the red beard as soon as possible.

Charged with this duty the 'Frisco sport left the shanty with the message in his possession.

Of course he did not know the contents of the paper, but he was certain that Meta's decision had called it into existence.

The waif of the Sierras was exerting an influence on the affairs of Blister.

Merle went straight to Old Resolute's, which was the most natural place at which to look for Boulder Burt.

His man was not there, however.

"Go to the Last Chance," said some one among the men at the bar.

Merle gave the speaker a questioning look.

"Pardon me, cap'n. We know you ain't been here long so you don't know whar the Last Chance is."

"Right you are, sir."

In a moment the man from 'Frisco was directed, and as he turned away he heard a slightly derisive laugh behind him.

Ten minutes afterward he made the discovery that the Last Chance was a played-out mine, but a close examination of the mouth of the shaft which seemed to lead into the depths of a mountain, told him that a pair of heavy boots passed in before him.

Anxious to find Boulder Burt, Captain Merle did not hesitate but plunged forward, and was soon enveloped in darkness.

On, on he went, feeling his way forward by moving his hand along the rough wall up the shaft.

All at once he touched an object that was not stone, and a voice saluted him in the darkness:

"Who ar' you, sir?"

Merle drew back and noiselessly drew his knife.

"Don't try your hand, pard," continued the same voice. "I reckon Boulder Burt kin see whar yer heart is ef it is as dark as Egypt hyer."

Boulder Burt! Merle had found the very man he was looking for.

A few hasty explanations were followed by the crack of a Lucifer, and Captain Merle saw the bearded face and drooping shoulder of the man whom Trinidad Tom had singled out as the one of all to carry out his sealed commands.

Boulder Burt took the message between his yellowish fingers, and broke the wax.

Merle watched him narrowly while he read.

"Does he mean this?" asked Burt looking suddenly into Captain Merle's face.

"I presume he does. He wrote like a man who meant just what he was putting down."

"What happened to make him take this turn?"

Merle looked at the crumpled paper and then at the man who held it.

Burt the red-bearded did not offer to submit the writing for inspection.

"I don't know that anything special happened," replied Merle at length.

"Yes, there did," was the persistent rejoinder.

"This is the last command I expected, unless the captain thinks he's goin' to pass over his chips."

"There's no likelihood of his doing that just now."

"Then, why this order?" cried Burt.

"I don't know, I'm sure. Are you going to obey it?"

"By heavens! yes. I'm no shirk. I war one o' the first to take the oath of the Eternal League and to subscribe to the code, and I obey the captain in whatever he wants done. Of course I'm going to carry out this command."

Merle saw the order thrust into Boulder Burt's pocket, and while he burned to know its contents, he was not the man to pry into business not his own.

"Kin you find the way back, cap'n?" asked Burt as his little torch expired.

"I came here in the dark."

"Then, you're all right. Good-night, Cap'n—Merle, I believe."

Thus dismissed, the 'Frisco sport allowed a queer smile to cross his face.

He knew that Boulder Burt was no longer before him, for a step told him that the custodian of the mandate had gone back into the mine.

Merle did not remain, but moved toward the entrance and soon saw the first stars of evening shining in the west.

"The prince of evil himself!" suddenly exclaimed Merle, halting when he had advanced a few yards from the mouth of the shaft. "The

red villain is apt to discover that he has a white Satan at his heels!"

Captain Merle stood like a statue in the dusk with his gaze fastened on the figure he had discovered.

Not far away stood the red gold guide, his person painted in animated silhouette as it were against the dark gray sky.

What had brought Red Cloud back to Blister?

The Indian for once, despite his eagle eyes, seemed totally unaware of the presence of any one.

His face was turned toward the log cabins lying in his front, and his gaze seemed to be fixed on them as if he were waiting for some one, or were watching the camp like a hawk.

Once Merle leveled his six-shooter at the Indian's head, and his finger rested nervously on the trigger, but a thought of the secret Red Cloud might possess caused the weapon to drop undischarged.

At last the red-skin took a step forward, and then he was joined by another person, Indian like himself.

Captain Merle started.

"How is the white man's nest?" he heard Red Cloud ask his friend.

"The hawks do not stir," was the reply.

"How is the man who was shot by his brother?"

"He is on his back."

"Good!" said Red Cloud, through his teeth.

"What else has Long Thunder seen?"

"There is a pretty white girl in the nest."

"Red Cloud has seen her."

"She is alone."

"Come! Long Thunder forgets the red beauty he left among the lodges of the Klamath. The white rose in the mountain nest is not for him. We can go back now. The white men who followed Red Cloud like fools into the mountains will not step between us and the city of the money-bugs. The trail is clear. Here! this way, Long Thunder," and the hand of Red Cloud whirled his reluctant comrade about. "We take the trail back to 'Frisco—to the palace of the man whose slave Red Cloud has been these many days."

Captain Merle almost leaped forward as the two Indians turned their backs on Blister City.

The last words of the wily Klamath had thrilled him.

Red Cloud had found the lost mine, and had turned his face toward San Francisco with his report ready for Mark Talbot, the millionaire!

Was the secret and its holder to escape? Was the Indian to deliver the report and force Talbot to keep his part of the compact?

No!

Merle Monterey moved forward as the Indians vanished, but the next second a figure rose in his path, and his arm was clutched as a face leaned toward him with a look of icy sternness.

"This is my trail, Captain Merle! Go back to your old pard in the camp, or get into other business. I haven't learned under Captain Coldgrip to let an Indian like the wily rascal down yonder beat Sunshine Sam on a trail of this kind. I repeat that you don't want to follow the money-bug's guide. Medora shall never be Red Cloud's bride. You're not the only man who has sworn this. Go back to Captain Trinidad. Good-by, Captain Merle."

With exasperating coolness the man who had just spoken—Luckless Luke, as the parads of Blister called him—walked away, leaving Merle bewildered.

What would happen next?

Sunshine Sam was still in sight when the ground under Merle's feet shook like an earthquake convulsion, and at the same time his ears were filled with a deafening sound.

The 'Frisco sport whirled about, but saw nothing. The explosion was a mystery he could not solve.

CHAPTER XXX.

LOST AND FOUND.

THE report which appeared to come from toward the Last Chance Mine in which he had lately delivered the sealed commands to Boulder Burt confused Captain Merle for a spell.

Undoubtedly an explosion had taken place underground, but just where could not be determined.

Merle Monterey kept his feet despite the violent convulsion of the ground under him, and when he recovered and looked for Sunshine Sam, that individual was gone.

"I must not let the Indian get away, neither must the detective get ahead of me!" he exclaimed. "I was right when I told Trinidad that Luckless Luke was Captain Coldgrip's pupil in disguise; but I did not expect to encounter him here. Why has he sworn that Medora shall never become Red Cloud's wife? What interest has Sunshine Sam in Mark Talbot's ward? By the eternal hills! I wouldn't turn my hand over between the red-skin and the sleuth."

Circumstances forced Merle back to camp.

He found that Red Cloud and his watch-dog had disappeared as completely as if the ground had opened and engulfed them.

It was getting too dark for him to distinguish anything on the trail, and without inspecting it far, the captain of the Silent Six turned toward Blister City.

He went straight to Trinidad Tom's cabin.

"Hold on thar, pard," called a voice as he touched the wooden latch, and Merle looked over his shoulder to see approaching through the last remnants of day the striking figure of Boulder Burt.

He had to look twice before he recognized the man, for the red beard had been nearly burned away, and the most familiar "landmark" about the fellow was the dropped shoulder.

"One minute," continued Burt, throwing up his hands as he came on.

Merle stepped back from the cabin door and met him.

"Did ye hear it?" asked the deformed sport, a strange twinkle in his eyes, about which were darkish circles like powder burn.

"Yes," answered Monterey. "I both heard and felt it."

"Was it that bad? Well, it must have been a stunner. The fuse was too fat at the end, and that's how I lost my strawberry whiskers."

"A fuse?" echoed Merle. "Then—"

"Yes, I did it. You brought the orders, you know, and I told you that I intended to obey 'em to the letter."

"What did you do?"

"I blew up the Glazed Dungeon," and Boulder Burt leaned toward Merle and emphasized his whispered reply in a most startling manner.

"My God!" cried Merle, retreating a step and looking the Blisterite in the face.

"It was orders and I'm the man to carry 'em out."

"But the dungeon held a prisoner."

"I know it did. Do you think I'd have received orders if it had been empty?"

"It was undermined, then?"

"Sartainly. I guess more than one pard has wondered what became of all the powder and dynamite we've got from the outside world during the past year. Captain Trinidad and a few more o' us have known all along."

"Why couldn't Captain Tom have finished Saturn in a less inhuman manner?"

"I don't know. I wonder if the shock shook Blister like it shook the immediate vicinity?"

"Let us see."

Merle looked toward the cabin he was about to enter when called off by Boulder Burt.

"I won't go in just now," said the executioner. "You kin remark that you felt a shock and heard a strange noise. I'll deliver the particulars after awhile."

Burt turned away and left Merle to enter the cabin of the boss of Blister.

"There's nothing to keep me here," thought Merle. "If I can't overtake the Indian I can go back to 'Frisco and baffle him when he comes. Still, I'd like to find him this side of Talbot's place. If I could but discover the lost mine and carry its diagram to Talbot, along with evidence that Red Cloud is out of the way, my path to the richest and prettiest wife in California would be clear."

Boulder Burt had disappeared by the time the city sport had shut the cabin door behind him, and while he was narrating the explosion experience to Trinidad Tom, Burt was trimming the remains of his beard in his own shanty.

Meantime, in the mountains beyond the limits of Blister City, three figures were moving over a tortuous trail.

One was some distance behind the other two, but his eyes, as keen as the eagle's, did not let them get beyond his sight.

Sunshine Sam, once more in his element, was "on the trail," and the objects of his espionage were Red Cloud and his Indian friend.

More than once since quitting San Francisco three months before he had lost sight of the wily Klamath, whose com act with Talbot the millionaire had sent him out in search of the fabulous mine believed to exist somewhere in the heart of the Sierras. As we have seen repeatedly in the course of our romance, he had lost Red Cloud but to find him again, and now he was following the Indian—whither?

Back to 'Frisco!

It would be strange, Sunshine Sam thought, if the trail should end where it had begun—in the luxurious home of Mark Talbot, the California nabob.

He had more on hand than the task of preventing Medora from becoming the wife of the Indian by his fulfillment of his part of the compact. He had crossed the continent to find the lost bonanza himself, the story he had heard in New York had lured him over the Rockies, and upon the trail of a red-skin as wily as the panther of the Rockies.

Now he was going back to 'Frisco with the bonanza undiscovered; he was following Red Cloud back to Talbot, and with no hopes that he could telegraph to Captain Coldgrip from 'Frisco that his mission had been successful.

Under circumstances like these the feelings of the tireless detective may be imagined.

True he had taken part in a somewhat exciting game at Blister City. He had saved Jackson Janes from a living death of horror in the

dungeon of a mine; he had played the role of Luckless Luke and wormed himself into Captain Trinidad's confidence; but beyond these things Sam felt, as he bit his lip, that he had done nothing.

"Hang it all! I want the Indian's secret," he exclaimed. "If he has found the bonanza—and he would not be going back now if he had not—I must know where it is. Didn't I assure the captain when I left him that I would make this the crowning trail of my life? By Jupiter! that's just what I intend to do."

After dark a while the full round moon came up silencing the mountain trail, and crossing it here and there with the long shadows of tree and crag.

Sunshine Sam lost his quarry in a canyon. He had not the eyes of the night-hawk nor the sharp ears of the fox.

The pupil of the great Coldgrip was human despite his keenness and sagacity, and midnight found him on a lost trail with success apparently as far away as ever.

Sam leaned against a bowlder with folded arms, and went carefully over the situation.

More than one man would have given up the chase at that stage of the game. He knew detectives accounted excellent man-hunters who would have thought of throwing up the game and retiring in disgust.

But Sunshine Sam was not of that mettle. He thought of the little motto hanging in a modest corner of an up-stairs office three thousand miles away:

"WE NEVER SLEEP!"

To go back now would be to say that he had slept on duty and that the fox had eluded him while he dreamed.

He had not "slept" since setting out on the trail from the gardens of Mark Talbot's mansion, and it was not the time for him to give up now.

Long into the night the sharp organs of the nocturnal weasel might have seen the detective leaning against the big bowlder in the canyon.

He seemed to have become a part of the rock itself.

Daylight found him once more on the trail. He found among the stones that strewn the canyon's bed the trail he had lost in the night, but the game was not in sight.

"I go where the red-skin goes. If he keeps on, so do I, if he turns back he will find me ready to do the same."

A few hours after the utterance of such words a man stood on a rock that projected out over a trail far above the valleys, and shaded his eyes with a pair of bronze hands.

What did he see that gave to his face a glow of animation? What could he single out among the wilderness of rocks and bushes that could send his blood leaping in eager currents through his veins?

"It has been thus all along!" he cried. "I don't miss you very long, Red Cloud, my Indian fox. Once more I find you! Again you have Sunshine Sam on your trail. Now look out and show your cunning if you would outwit Claude Coldgrip's scholar."

He sprang down from the rock and ran over the trail like a deer. Nearly all the time he kept his eyes on the scenery far ahead.

He checked his eager gait at length, to crawl over a lot of rocks and along the edge of a natural wall, down which he could look several hundred feet.

"The boundary line of the Eternal League runs through this canyon," thought Sunshine Sam. "A short distance from here is the site of the old camp where there used to be some hieroglyphics on a stone. But Red Cloud, the cunning Indian, cut them out one night with hatchet and chisel, and afterward shot dead the member of Captain Merle's band who showed me to it. Is he going to take me back there?"

All the time Sunshine Sam was watching a pair of moving figures in the stony bed below.

He knew that just beyond the canyon towered the mutilated rock he had mentioned, and he noiselessly followed Red Cloud and his comrade while they advanced toward it.

At the mouth of the mountain gulch the two Indians halted.

Their eyes seemed to scrutinize their surroundings with the keenness of the ferret. They looked above and below, and at last became satisfied, apparently, that they had no hunter at their heels.

Five minutes later, Sunshine Sam saw them stand at the mutilated rock.

He saw Red Cloud illustrate by pantomime to Long Thunder how he had destroyed the puzzling inscription, but he was too far above the pair to catch the Indian's voice.

"Now show me the prize," laughed the sleuth. "I've followed you long enough, Red Cloud. Give me something to laugh over."

The nabob's red tool turned suddenly from the rock. His gait became so rapid that his companion could hardly keep up with him.

All at once Red Cloud halted and pointed at what appeared a solid mountain wall.

Long Thunder leaned forward, with avidity on his gaunt red face.

"Let Long Thunder use his eyes as best he can," came up to Sunshine Sam from Red

Cloud's lips. "If he had the eye of the eagle he could not see the treasure the white man has sought so long. It is straight ahead, but we need not look at it. Red Cloud has led Long Thunder to the spot, so that he can confirm the chief's words if the Frisco nabob doubts. Come!"

Red Cloud straightened and walked away; Long Thunder followed.

Sunshine Sam stepped back, and sent his hat whirling into the air!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LAST MATCH.

THE sleuth of the Sierras believed that he had at last made the great discovery of his hunt, and his exultation knew no bounds when he sent his hat spinning toward the tops of the mountain pines.

Checking his glee, he turned to the canyon again and watched the figures of Red Cloud and Long Thunder till they vanished down the wild trail.

"If Red Cloud's pard could not see the mine with his eagle eyes, let me see what mine can do," laughed Sam while he descended to the bed of the gulch.

It was a perilous descent even for a strong, agile man like the detective; but he stood at last where the Indians had halted.

"Red Cloud was right. I see nothing here," said he, and then he went forward using his eyes all the while.

A very close inspection of what seemed a solid wall of mountain rock showed Sam an aperture barely large enough to admit a human body.

"It is here! After all, Mark Talbot, you have not believed in vain, nor have I crossed the continent for a shadow. There will be no more circles drawn on the map in your library, and you won't run after every gold-sport you hear of."

Sunshine Sam had not discovered the mouth of the lost mine to desert it without a peep at the interior. He had not followed Red Cloud up one trail and down another to perform an act of this kind.

Although the opening was several feet above the reach of his hands, he drew his body up and crept in.

"I can afford to let the Indian go for a season," he thought. "A few hours' difference on the Frisco trail will not change the outcome. There is more than one slip between the lost bonanza and the hand of Medora the beautiful."

Sam did not explore the cavern far before he became convinced that he had found a spot which had been worked to some extent many years prior to his visit.

He felt his way deeper and deeper into its recesses with the aid of some dry pine which he fashioned into a torch.

Still, there were no gold signs.

Suddenly Sam drew back from a wall on which the light of his torch shone, and stared at some rude tracings which appeared in the stone.

"The puzzle which Red Cloud chiseled out of the mountain rock may have a duplicate here!" he exclaimed, drawing closer to the inscription. "A human hand has been at work on this wall, but long ago."

During the next few minutes the detective was at work on the rude letters, and when he had mastered them he could read as follows:

"We claim this ophir by the right of discovery. I have caused it to be named Claudia Mine, after my little girl. It is richer than the mines of King Solomon, and as deep, apparently, as the earth itself. Woe to the man or men who dares to claim it over the Banded Gold Hunters of California. For the band,
NATHAN NOLAND.

"Done in the year 186-."

"Noland? Noland?" cried Sunshine Sam at sight of the name appended to the cuttings in the stone. "Why, that is the name of the man the Eternal League hanged at Blister City for having too many aces in his possession. Is it possible that he had discovered this place? If so, why was he a vagabond tramp, cheating at cards in the wild camps of the Sierra? There's something wrong here. Either there were two Noland, or the executed man had lost the Ophir I have found."

Again and again Sam went over the inscription with his torch.

It was a marvelous discovery.

The letters were rudely done in the stone, but their very rudeness seemed to give them a startling emphasis.

"There may be more of this kind of work here," thought the sleuth. "As Nathan— Hold on! Trinidad Tom told me the whole name of the man they hung. It was Noel Noland! That was it! There was no Nathan to it at all. This deepens the mystery if the gambler told the truth. There must have been two Noland—one the discoverer of the mine, and the other the father of a girl named Claudia, and the other the gambler and vagabond. Both must be dead now. One I am sure is, for I saw his grave in the planting-place of Blister City."

Sam left the chamber of the inscription and pushed his discoveries on.

"Hello!" he cried, stopping suddenly as his torch revealed a sheer descent of ten feet. "No-

land said the richness of the mine is as deep as the earth itself. It begins to look that way."

The Chip of the Old Block leaned forward and tried to throw his light about the walls of the place beneath, but could not succeed to his satisfaction. At length he resolved to descend, and a minute afterward he lowered himself over the wall and dropped.

Fortunately the chamber was no deeper than he supposed it to be, and in a short time he was inspecting a place which, had he not discovered an outlet near the floor, would have admirably served the purposes of a dungeon.

As a matter of course, Sam pushed into the narrow natural corridor which appeared to beckon him on to some new revelation.

"The mountain is honey-combed!" burst from him after he had gone from one strange corridor into another for more than an hour. Now and then he saw marks of picks on the walls, but no more inscriptions.

"I must go back and get more pine for a torch. I have but one more match, and it must supply me with new light. This mine is endless, or appears to be so."

The detective turned back at last.

He saw that his torch had burned almost to his hand, and that the particles falling off would soon reduce it to no torch at all.

All at once the catastrophe came sooner than he expected it.

His torch gave out, and the remnants that fell to the floor contained no flame large enough to direct him.

Sunshine Sam stopped in the dark, and thought over the situation.

He had reached the spot by threading a lot of labyrinthine passages, as puzzling almost as a maze, and the short life of a single match would do him no good.

"I believe I can get back to the little cavern by the walls," concluded the sleuth of the Sierras. "My match is not to be used till I can find some pine of which there is a good deal scattered about the floor of the dungeon. Here goes! An owl's eyes wouldn't do me any good here. I've got to trust all to my hands."

He started along the stony wall of one of the many passages, and at the end of it turned into another, to pursue it to the end, and enter a third, all as dark as the dungeons of the doges.

On, on for nearly another hour pressed the detective.

"Halt!" he cried at length, and came to a stand-still. "It seems to me that I've gone far enough. I should be back to the dungeon into which I dropped from the corridor overhead. I'm in a chamber now, but the walls are not like its walls. Ho! what are these strange indentations I touch! Marks?—letters? By Jupiter! I cannot have reached Nathan's inscription. It is impossible! "Shall I risk my last match?"

Sam felt the wall in the dark until he was confident that he had found some more carvings in the rock. The tracings were not as deep as those he had seen before, and as he followed them with his acute touch, he easily resolved them into an important message.

The sleuth was sorely tempted.

Like Saturn on the Frisco trail with the sealed orders in his hand, Sam the sleuth could hardly keep his hand away from his last match.

"I have gone the wrong way, I know I have!" he exclaimed. "I have lost the trail back to the entrance. Fate or fortune, Heaven knows which, has led me to this message in the stone. I'm going to read it!"

Out came the match and the next instant it burst into flame along the unseen wall in front of the detective.

"As I thought! This is not the little dungeon!" burst from Sam's throat as he held the match above his head. "Here are marks in the wall. Now, what are they?"

If ever a man leaned forward controlled by burning eagerness it was Sunshine Sam in the heart of what he thought was the lost gold-mine of the Sierras.

"A poorer chisel than Noland's did this work!" he cried. "What is this? Great God! I have found the last words of some dying wretch."

Then, with staring eyes that seemed to protrude from their sockets, Sunshine Sam read by the light of his match the most thrilling sentences that had ever met his gaze:

"Noland's gold-mine is a death-trap! I have found it, to die like a dog here. There is no escape from this underground maze. May God curse my greed for gold! I deserve the fate I have found."

"HOTSPUR HOOK,
of Monteverde."

"Am I to be the next victim?" flashed across Sam's mind as the name of the entrapped gold-seeker danced before his sight. "There is no date to this; but he came here after Noland left. He was lured into the mine by the letters on the stone near the entrance. But where is Hotspur Hook?"

Sunshine Sam drew back and began to explore the cavern.

Suddenly something was seen to glisten in the light of his match.

He stooped and clutched it and held up the hilt of a dagger with the blade worn down almost to the handle.

In an instant Sam saw that he held in his hand the implement with which the man before him had cut the letters in the stone.

This startling discovery only roused the sleuth to action.

His match flickered above his hand, but ere it died he tore the lining from his hat twisted it closely and caught the blaze.

The light guided him back to the entrance by which he had found the chamber, and the backward trail began.

All at once the sleuth sprung back with a cry which the coolest man on earth could not have suppressed.

"I've found Hotspur Houk!" thought he, and then he stooped and held his improvised torch over the human skeleton that lay at his feet.

He had not seen it before, nor had his feet touched it in the dark, which was strange, for it lay lengthwise along the passage, just where Hotspur Houk had perished long before.

"I'm in a new part of the maze!" exclaimed Sam, springing up, as the terrible gravity of his situation forced itself upon him. "The matter looks serious. I am in a trap, and the red fox of the Klamaths is the bait that caught me."

The grinning, ghostly skeleton on the floor of the corridor seemed to mock at the sleuth's situation. Hotspur Houk had found a companion.

Sunshine Sam stood for a few moments on the spot like a man in a dilemma, and indeed he was, in the greatest one of his life.

The light got lower and lower as it approached his hand.

Suddenly the twisted hat-lining dropped, and as the blaze went out with a suddenness that startled Sam, he threw the burned stuff away with a mad curse.

"It's Sunshine Sam *versus* darkness and death!" he cried. "I've fought 'em both before, but not in a place of this sort. Red Cloud is on his way to his master. I am here—in Hotspur Houk's death-trap. My business is to get out, not to die here," and the echo that came back struck Sam's ears like a sound of doom.

It was:

"Die here!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

NABOB AND PAUPER.

READER, let us leave for a time the depths of the Sierras and the exciting scenes to which we have been accustomed for some time, and go back to our starting-point—Frisco, the city of the money-bugs.

It is night among the thousands of lights that shine everywhere from Nob Hill to the beach, and from Chinatown to the recesses of Golden Gate Park, where we would not see Sunshine Sam, as once we saw him, watching the dashing spray while he wrestled with the problem of the lost bonanza.

Up and down the length of a richly carpeted room walks a handsome man past fifty. It is our old acquaintance, Mark Talbot, the individual we have seen with Red Cloud, the Indian, and whose oath we heard over the "Book of books" in as disgraceful a compact as ever a white man engaged in.

Every now and then Talbot throws anxious and impatient glances toward a certain door.

He is looking for some one.

At last there comes to his ear the click of a bolt as the door is opened, and the millionaire bonanza-hunter drops into a chair that stands beside the table.

"What kept you?" he says, with a scowl to the youth who comes in and advances, while he takes something from his bosom.

"He was very slow. I think, sir, that the man is not going to live long."

"Is he that bad?" exclaimed Talbot, putting forth his hand for the paper the boy holds, and then dismissing him with a gesture, he leans toward the light and opens the message.

"I won't stand an answer of this sort!" he flashes. "By heavens! he is putting me off for a purpose. Leon!"

His voice reaches beyond the door which the youth has left ajar, and in a moment Leon is back.

"Did he write this without study?" and the 'Frisco nabob holds the paper up before the little fellow, a bright boy of fifteen, who stands respectfully before him, cap in hand.

"He wrote very slowly, sir. Indeed, I think him too feeble to use his hands like some people do."

"Thanks for the opinion," smiles Talbot. "Was he surprised to hear from me?"

"I think he was, sir."

"And you don't think him strong enough to come here—not even in a carriage?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That will do."

The boy departs again and the Californian crushes the paper in his hand as the old scowl of displeasure changes his color.

"It is a trick!" he cries. "Nathan knows more than he wants to tell. More than three months ago I sent the Indian and Captain Merle after the secret of the Sierras. Later on I sent Little Onyx out with a private message for Merle. What has the result been? I have had no returns! Little Onyx was to have returned at once, but he has not kept his word. Red Cloud was positive. He drew the last circle on the map yonder—the little blue one. Does it take an Indian three months to go to the mountains and back?"

He left the chair and went to the window that looked through the trees of the spacious yard in front of his mansion and thence down among the brilliant lights of the city.

"If he won't come to me, by the eternal stars! he must not think that I will not come to him!" parted his lips. "I have not done with Nathan Noland, the old prospector who has a secret which he does not care about divulging. If he is to be with us only a short time longer, as Leon thinks, the more cause

have I for seeing him. I want the buried treasure of the Sierras. It will lift me above the richest man in this country, and Talbot will be one of the money princes of the world."

Ten minutes afterward the 'Frisco nabob was among the very lights he had seen from his window, and in a short time he knocked at the front door of a humble house in front of which stood a large tree that shaded it through a part of the day.

A singular noise on the inside replied to his summons, and when the door was opened Talbot saw a figure fall back on a cot which had lately been propelled to the middle of the room.

The man on the bed started at sight of Talbot, and evidently wished from his look that the California Croesus was at that moment at the antipodes.

"I got your message, but it was not quite enough," said Talbot with refined coolness as he drew a chair up to the cot and took a seat.

"Your presence here tells as much," was the reply, and the speaker leaned back on the pillow and waited for Talbot to proceed.

"Nathan, I don't see why you can't tell me what you know," said he. "You cannot expect to be benefited in any way by the secret. You are likely to remain on your back the remainder of your days."

"It won't be for long, Colonel Talbot," and the speaker's eyes seemed to get a strange, unnatural brilliance. "You won't have Nathan to question in a short time. You'll have to go to somebody else then."

Mark Talbot was noticed to bite his lip.

"Look here," he exclaimed. "I've never more than half-believed the story about the injury which made a break in your memory. Eminent medical men tell me that such cases are very rare."

Nathan attempted to answer with a snap of resentment in his gaze, but the lifting of Talbot's hand checked him.

"Go on, then," he said, choking off his reply.

"You say, Nathan, that you lost a daughter years ago in the expedition that gave you the injury which impaired your memory. What do you think I have discovered?"

The answer was a look that seemed to pierce Talbot like an arrow.

"I have found that when you left 'Frisco the last time you had no daughter."

The words wrung a cry from the man on the bed.

"It is a lie! an infamous lie!" he cried, darting toward the cool nabob. "Stand before me the man who told you this. I lost my child—my Claudia—as I have fifty times told you the night I got the blow which blotted out a part of my life. Colonel Talbot, you will not bring me your informant. No, you will not let me see the slanderer who perhaps for some of your gold told you a lie as black as the pit of eternal darkness. I no daughter? I wish to God sometimes that I never had given to Claudia that life which is all I am living for now. Have your hunters failed that you send for me to-night? What has become of your red tracker, anyhow, Mark Talbot?"

The millionaire drew back from the glowing eyeballs of the haggard-faced man whose skeleton hand at the edge of the bed almost touched him.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"I talk about Red Cloud," was the quick retort. "Have you no report from him as I have none from my trailer?"

"Your trailer?" was the echo.

"Ay. I have a hunter in the Sierras."

"For the lost bonanza?"

"No. You can have that, colonel. You can send Red Cloud and Captain Merle and his pards after the lost treasure. I have sent my spy after my child."

"Who is your spy?"

Nathan the crippled was silent for a moment.

"I guess I needn't keep it back any longer," he resumed, a smile illumining his face for a second while he spoke. "I sent Claude Dumont into the mountains on the trail of the lost and the unknown."

"I have questioned him."

"Yes; you have seen them all. If I had your money I would have filled No-Gold Land with the best trailers in the West. Nay, I would have drawn the sleuth of sleuths from his haunt in New York—I would have called the famous Coldrip to my assistance. But I have nothing. I could offer no man a dollar reward; but thank Heaven, the man whom I sent to the Sierras was not of that kind."

"When did he start?" asked Talbot eagerly.

"The night your emissaries, both red and white, started on the bonanza trail."

"What news have you?"

"None, as I have told you. My man swore to find Claudia, or to come not back at all. Was your red fox that resolute?"

"He left an oath behind," admitted Talbot.

"An oath to unearth the treasure?"

"Yes."

"And three months have passed with no news from him?"

Talbot was forced to answer in the affirmative again.

"Red foxes are no better than white ones," laughed the man on the bed, and there was a tinge of latent joy in his tones. "I guess the bonanza is forever lost, Colonel Talbot?"

"Lost? By the souls of the saints! it shall be mine!" he cried. "Come, Nathan, why keep back longer the information I know you possess? You found a mine somewhere in the Sierras. You built your cabins near it not over its mouth, but something happened to drive you off. You say that the Indians came down on the camp, and that you lost your child and memory at the same time. If so, how could you give Claude Dumont, your spy, a clew to the place? He would not go to the Sierras without a thread in his hands."

"Ha, ha! He was to follow your trailers, Mark Talbot. Where the bonanza is, if it exists, I lost my child!" cried Nathan, and the skeleton hand crawled over the edge of the bed and clutched the nabob's sleeve.

Talbot's face instantly darkened, the old look again.

"Is this your game? You set a spy on the heels of my agents! You send your man to dog the footsteps of my mountain sleuths!"

The 'Frisco cripple gave the millionaire look for look.

"Don't you call it fair?" said Nathan, showing his teeth like an angered wolf. "What else could my man do, since Red Cloud boasted that he could find the bonanza for you? Claude had to strike the trail somewhere."

"It is infamous!" hissed Talbot, and as he spoke he broke from Nathan's clutch and leaned toward him. "It isn't so much a hunt for the lost child as it is a venture for gold. I see it now!"

The eyes of the two men met in the lamp-light with very little space between them.

It was glare for glare.

"To perdition with the lost riches!" cried Nathan.

"A thousand bonanzas like the one you want to enjoy, Mark Talbot, I would exchange for tidings from my child. Besides," and Nathan measured the words that crept one after the other through his almost wedded lips, "besides, the mine we found in the Sierras—whether it be your lost treasure or not—belongs to me!"

"To you?" roared Talbot. "By Jupiter! this is impudence in velvet!"

"Ay, to me, as the last survivor of the men who rediscovered it!" Nathan went on, paying no attention to Talbot's insulting ejaculation. "On its main wall beyond its mouth you will find my claim carved in stone. That treasure belongs to me. It is the claim of Nathan Noland—a claim which, if I had my old time strength, I would defend with my life."

"Then you know where it lies! You have sent your spy, Dumont, to the Sierras to keep my agents off. The lost daughter story is a myth—I don't care how well you cling to it. But I am here to say that you will never profit by the report your sleuth may bring."

"I will! Mark Talbot with his wealth cannot keep Noland from waiting till his hunter comes back. He—"

"I can! I will!" and the 'Frisco nabob darted at the man on the bed with the fury of a hawk, and the next moment two figures writhed in the light.

It was a struggle that lasted two minutes; then the front door opened and let Talbot out.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

VANISHED PREY.

SUCH was the scene that transpired in the house of Nathan the cripple. Nobody saw the Nabob of 'Frisco shut the door behind him and disappear in the labyrinth of streets that run in every direction in the capital of the gold coast.

Mark Talbot was soon back again in his sumptuous room with a map before him, and at his elbow a glass of wine that mocked the color of his nose.

Nothing on his countenance told of the encounter in the little house some distance from his own establishment; he was trying to make a calm study of the chart.

"I guess he didn't make anything by being insolent," ejaculated Talbot, as he turned to pay his respects to the glass whose contents imparted a rich glow to his cheeks and a sparkle to his eyes. "They don't get ahead of Mark Talbot, however well they play their hand. He couldn't keep back his story about his spy. I touched him in a tender spot, and he unmasked the whole scheme. Well," and the glass came back to the table, "I guess he won't grin over Claude Dumont's report. At least not on this mundane planet."

At the same moment far away over the leagues of wild country, Trinidad Tom, of whom Talbot knew nothing, was listening to a cleanly-trimmed, red-headed man who sat on a stool with his legs crossed and who talked rapidly and in coarse tones.

"You're certain the job was well done?" queried the boss of Blister City of the narrator as the latter paused a moment.

"I wish you war able to see for yourself," was the answer. "As I've said, the message you sent to me by Merle took my breath, for I didn't expect to see the prisoner disturbed till you got stouter, but Boulder Burt obeys orders no matter what they are."

"I'm sorry the fuse cost you your beard."

"Never mind that, cap'n. It'll grow out more beautiful than ever, and in course o' time I'll be the seraph o' bygone days. What comes next?"

"I want you to look in upon the youngster we condemned to the cavern."

"Jackson Jones, eh?"

"Yes."

"What? don't you think he's safe, cap'n?"

"Perhaps," said Trinidad doubtfully. "I want to be sure of it."

"We fastened him securely to the rock."

"So we did, but I know something that you are as yet ignorant of, Burt."

"Something important?"

"Yes. Luckless Luke has turned out to be quite a different person. The man is a sleuth—a detective."

Bowler Bill gave Trinidad Tom a look of incredulity.

"By Jove! this is one of the things that is new under the sun!" he exclaimed. "Of course I'll look in on the young bonanza-hunter. I'm off now, Captain Tom."

Trinidad of Blister City smiled to himself when the cabin door shut on the figure of Bowler Bill.

"One of them!" he murmured. "I guess the man who was sent to 'Frisco won't shoot any one else from the saddle. Saturn got too dangerous to be trifled with, and when I heard that Meta had decided to stand by him, I thought it high time to play my best hand. Now, there is nothing left of the Glazed Dungeon and its prisoner, and the girl has no man to stand by through thick and thin. I think the victory belongs to Trinidad Tom of the Sierras."

It seemed to do the prostrate sport good to give vent to words like these, for his eyes sparkled like diamonds and his hands played a mimic tune on the blankets of his couch.

He waited an hour for Bowler Burt to come back. It passed without bringing his faithful servant, and yielding to sleep, of which he had had but little since his wounding, he turned from the light and dropped into slumber.

Of course he did not see the pale but beautiful girlish face that came to the window of his shanty, and contemplated him a few moments with a smile at the corners of an exquisitely chiseled mouth.

It vanished as noiselessly as it had appeared, and

after it the faces of several men came and went at the same window.

By-and-by Bowlder Burt came back.

He opened the door and looked at Trinidad Tom a few seconds, then bent over the blankets and touched the sleeper.

"Captain," said Burt with bad news written on his face, "I got thar too late."

Trinidad uttered a cry which sent him toward his spy.

"Too late at the cavern?" he cried.

"Yes. Thar's nobody thar."

The announcement had the effect of an unexpected thunderbolt.

"It can't be! I won't believe that you found the place empty!"

"I found it in no other shape, captain."

The boss of Blister City let out an oath of rage.

"Who did it? We fixed him so he could not help himself."

Bowlder Burt mulely shook his head.

"Was it the girl?"

"She was not told whither we had taken him."

"Not unless Saturn the traitor divulged the secret."

"Saturn would not do that. He voted for instant death you know? Gone! Jackson Janes who knew Noland's secret, at large—set free by some one on the outside?"

"It looks that way, captain."

For several moments Trinidad Tom looked beyond his comrade, with deep thought in his eyes.

"Why did Sunshine Sam come back and play the role of Luckless Luke if not for a scheme of liberation?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Send me Merle. He is shrewd and full of excellent ideas."

"Merle is gone."

"Away from Blister?"

"Yes."

"What takes him off so sudden? Besides, how do you know he has departed?"

"He rode away just as I came back from the cavern."

"In which direction?"

"Westward—toward 'Frisco."

"Let him go. I still have work for you, Burt. As you have failed to find the young bonanza-hunter, you may look in on Meta. She is one who is still among us."

"If I find her, what?" asked Bowlder Burt.

"Don't disturb her—at least don't let her know that I am seeking a little information."

"I'll play it shrewdly," was the response. "The girl shall not know that I'm within a mile of her."

Bowlder Burt again left his master, and proceeded direct to Meta's house.

The sudden disappearance of the young man from 'Frisco, Nathan's spy, puzzled him not a little.

He could not get it through his head how Luckless Luke could have discovered him, and he did not believe that Meta had a hand in the liberation.

An ominous silence brooded over the girl's cabin when the pard of the mountain league halted at the door and raised the latch with the utmost caution of the nocturnal prowler.

For some moments Bowlder Burt stood at the step with his senses on the alert, but not the slightest sound rewarded his pains.

"Hang it all! people generally breathe when they sleep!" ejaculated Burt, at last out of patience. "I am commissioned to find the Seraph of the Sierras, and I always find those whom I am set after. Always? Well, no; I didn't find the chap we left to the slow death in the mine."

Bowlder Burt crept across the threshold and into the darkness of the cabin.

Still he heard no sounds.

"I've got to feel," he thought. "My hands must have eyes in a place of this kind. Here's the table and—Ah! this is the couch of the Sierra princess!"

A moment later an audible cry drove Bowlder Burt's lips apart.

"By Jupiter! she is gone!"

His hands had discovered an empty bed in the gloom of the cabin.

What would Trinidad Tom say now?

"I guess the girl had a hand in the liberation," passed through the pard's mind. "Couldn't Captain Tom have seen at the start that the young chap war bound to catch Meta's eye? Looking after a bonanza, was he? No; that warn't it. My head for it now that it war more for beauty than booty!"

Bowlder Burt drew back from the empty couch.

"Thar'll be s me almighty tall swearing when Trinidad catches on," he laughed. "I can't break bad news to a fellow gently, so he's apt to get the whole thing in a lump and with no preliminaries. Hyer's the door again, thank fortune!"

At that moment the Blister City sport opened the portal, letting in a mingled flood of moonshine and starlight.

"Halt, Bowlder Burt!" exclaimed a voice, that went through the listener like a knife. "Don't throw your hand to your belt, you infernal villain! I've got a score to settle with you."

There came out of the shadows of the shanty, as the e startling words greeted Trinidad's right bower, the form of a man, from which Bowlder Burt instinctively recoiled.

"Great Heaven!" cried Burt. "I thought—"

"Of course you thought so, but I'm no dismembered spirit scattered among the debris of the Glazed Dungeon," was the interruption. "It takes a bigger lot of explosives than we hid there to blow Saturn of Blister to kingdom come."

Surprised too much to offer the slightest resistance Bowlder Burt had been seized by the shoulders and a power had pushed him back against the logs of the cabin, while the mixed light outside had revealed to him the features of Saturn, the man he thought he had totally destroyed with the Glazed Dungeon.

It was to Bowlder Burt the most startling revelation of his life.

"Well, I only obeyed orders," growled Burt, looking into the fiercely set face before him.

"Of course, but you war one o' the first to vote me traitor and deserter when Trinidad had sent me with a lie in my pocket to 'Frisco. I've got to make a beginning some-where, you see, Burt."

One of the hands had been transferred to Bowlder Burt's trachea, and now felt very unpleasant in the neighborhood of his collar.

"I've got to do something or I'll die like a dog in this man's grip," thought Trinidad's spy. "If I war Saturn, and Saturn Bowlder Burt, I wouldn't think o' mercy even if war only carrying out orders from headquarters."

All at once Burt executed a quick move which he thought would give him the advantage, but, agile as he was, he found Saturn, the suspicious, on his guard.

During the next few seconds two men wrestled against the wall of Meta's little cabin, but one had the advantage from the first, and he did not hesitate to make use of it.

"After a while you can go and tell Captain Tom," laughed a coarse voice in the shanty, and then a stalwart man with garments somewhat disarranged stepped outside and walked off.

He was followed, but not until half an hour had elapsed, by a person who tottered as he went down the deserted street of Blister City.

He kept on till he reached the closed door of Trinidad Tom's cabin, and as he opened it he tripped on the step and pitched headlong inside!

It was with a wild cry that he tried to steady himself, but the efforts he put forth were fruitless, and he tumbled heavily across a man who occupied a bed near the middle of the floor.

There was no responsive cry as the twain collided.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONE TRAIL AND A DOUBLE QU ST.

Bowlder Burt rose to his feet as soon as he could, though a sensation of faintness still held possession of him.

"In God's name, what is here?" he exclaimed, shrinking from the touch his hands encountered.

The cabin door was open, and light enough came in to let him see the outlines of the object he had fallen over.

It was a man on some blankets on the floor, and Burt's first thought was that it was Trinidad Tom.

The following second he passed his hand over a face that retained some warmth, and then a lucifer showed him the form and features of the boss of Blister City.

A cry of horror broke from the Californian's throat.

"Of course Saturn came here after he thought he had finished me," said he. "The traitor of the camp saw that he could not afford to go away and leave a spark of life in Trinidad's bosom. That's why the boss is dead in his shanty."

Bowlder Burt inspected the body as well as he could with his match, but he could see no signs of violence and nothing that told of a struggle.

"I don't understand it, but of course Saturn's hand is in the last play," he remarked to himself before his match went out, leaving him alone with the corpse. "This puts a stop to Trinidad's game against Saturn, in which I fancy Meta war the stakes. What had I best do—alarm the camp?"

While the mountain pard debated in his mind the best course to pursue, a man walked up the mountain with Blister at his back.

"I got even with one o' them, but death cheated me out o' the other," he was saying. "I could see that the hemorrhage came on suddenly, and that it made short work o' him. Well, I'm responsible for it after all, for it was my bullet that tumbled him on his back and gave death an easy victory. I would like to have told him, though, that Meta war gone, but that I intend to find her. He couldn't wait for that. No; he thought he had blown me to pieces with the Glazed Dungeon; but from the way I feel, I'm worth a dozen dead men yet. I know now that Jackson Janes, the young prospector, escaped from the mine whar we left him, and the absence of Meta tells me what followed. Gone off together—he and the girl. Breaking for 'Frisco, of course. Well, so am I."

A laugh followed the last words, and while it sounded on the night air, Saturn quickened his gait.

The mountains swallowed him up, as it were, for he vanished like a man who walks from light into the gaping mouth of a dungeon.

Bowlder Burt concluded to sound the alarm, and the news of Trinidad's death, with its accessories, fell like a lightning-bolt from a clear sky upon the assembled pards in Old Resolute's place.

At first no one believed the report, then Burt emphasized his statements, and the whole crowd rushed to Captain Trinidad's cabin.

A look of course confirmed the doleful news. The Eternal League of Sierras had no head.

It is not for our pen to detail the scene in the cabin, nor to transcribe the oaths of vengeance that rose over the corpse of the camp dictator.

Daylight could not come soon enough for the maddened gang of toughs. Its minutes seemed to drag themselves away on wings of lead. The crowd went back to the bar and renewed their oaths over the liquors Old Resolute furnished free.

"I don't believe altogether that Saturn did it," suddenly exclaimed Orinoco whom the reader has already met. "I beg leave ter ask whar Captain Merle is?"

The men looked at the speaker and then at each other.

"He left camp awhile ago," answered Bowlder Burt.

"Left, did he?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Some time before I found Trinidad dead."

"That may be. Merle Monterey came ter Blister for what? We know that but one thing would fetch the California sport higher and that is—gold! Thar ar' half a dozen men here who saw him with Trinidad a short time before the cold-blooded killing. Why isn't he here now?"

It was evident that the men of Blister City had picked out a thread from the skein.

"Why beat the bush?" continued Orinoco. "I say that Merle Monterey's hand and not Saturn's did it. He could not get Trinidad's papers while he lived. They're gone now, for I looked awhile ago whar he kept them, and they were not there. This renewal of the friendship of other years was fatal to Captain Trinidad. Merle Monterey has the blood of our chief on his hands!"

Orinoco convinced his hearers.

The keen black eyes and silken hands of Captain

Merle were not for nothing. He had taken advantage of Trinidad's situation, and after the tragedy he had sneaked out of camp, back to the trail which had brought him into the heart of No-Gold Land.

Then and there—under the roof of Old Resolute's bar—the code of the Eternal League was both amended and broken.

The pards of Blister resolved to pursue Merle to the antipodes if necessary, and at the same time they declared that that part of the code which kept them within a certain territory was null and void.

The League of the Sierras had been transformed into a band of avengers.

Before the morning came a little party carried through the camp, and some distance up the mountain slope, a stiffened figure on a rude bier.

It was the corpse of Trinidad Tom.

A grave was quickly made for its reception, and in a short time the pine cones and clods of the Sierras were mingling on the sport's breast.

Orinoco lingered after the funeral, and when the tramp of his comrades had died away, he raised his right hand, and over the fresh earth that covered Trinidad, swore to devote his life to vengeance.

His oath was against Captain Merle—Merle, the innocent.

"You can't afford to spend your life hunting the guiltless," said a voice so near Orinoco's in tone that the oath-taker turned with a start.

The following moment the Blisterite stood face to face with a man with a physique like his own, but with a queer smile on his face.

"Saturn!" cried Orinoco, springing erect after a brief inspection of the countenance before him.

"Do you call Merle Monterey innocent?"

"I do."

"Who, then, is guilty?"

"Nobody, of murder. Captain Trinidad died from the wound he got when I rode back, a brand d traitor, and called him out. He had his chance. He threw up his hand as I lifted mine, and I felt the ball he launched at my heart."

"You?" cried Orinoco.

"Yes. I have worn over my heart for years, attached to a buckskin string, a locket which Trinidad's bullet struck—true to his aim. That is why I am here and not yonder, whar the boss lies under the clods and the cones."

"It is marvelous!" exclaimed Orinoco.

"That's just what it is," was the answer. "My solemn word for it, Orinoco, that Merle was out of Blister when Trinidad handed in his checks. I know it, for I saw the captain draw his last breath. My hand was on the latch of his door, and one foot was inside. Death found him alone, and the victory warn't very hard for the grim monster."

"I'm afraid you couldn't make the boys believe this," and Orinoco looked toward the silent camp with its ghostly cabins.

"Maybe not," smiled Saturn. "I shall not try to at any rate. I am here to say that Merle is innocent, and that I am the man, if any one is guilty of murder."

"What made you desert us?" asked Orinoco, with a show of bitterness in his voice.

"I did not desert," was the firm reply.

"You went off."

"Driven from Blister City by the man you have just buried!" said Saturn.

Orinoco shortened the distance between himself and Saturn.

"Tell me, Saturn," cried he, touching the arm of the outlawed pard. "By heavens! if Blister has done you wrong, it shall make atonement."

For the next few minutes Saturn told the story of Trinidad's scheme, and the game he had played to carry them out.

He was listened to with attention to the close.

"Here is the hand of Orinoco," cried the mountain sport. "If I had worn your shoes when you came back to camp I would have called the captain out. I never suspected, though, that he wanted Meta."

"Nor did I long before the ride toward 'Frisco with sealed orders."

"Where is Meta now?"

Saturn shook his head and smiled.

"I see. You have lost the girl!" cried Orinoco. "You have guarded her a long time. I have always believed that you know something about her which is a secret to Blister City."

"That is true. Woe to the man who touches or takes the Seraph of the Sierras without my consent! I have always said this, Orinoco. Why, bless you, the girl almost belongs to me."

Orinoco gave Saturn a curious look.

"I presume you would not explain?" he ventured.

"I raised her; that is, she owes her life to me, and I intended to watch over her until I could restore her to one who has a better right to her than I have—that is, of course, if he be living."

"Is that person her father?"

"It is."

"Where do you expect to find him?"

"You puzzle me now, Orinoco," cried Saturn. "Do I think this young prospector, Jackson Janes, who has run off with the girl, capable of solving the mystery which surrounds her life? A thousand times no! He will drag her to 'Frisco perchance. In the whirl of the city her beauty will attract, and the young hotspur will lose the prize before he has fairly won it. Can't you see this, Orinoco? Jackson Janes is not the man to solve the mystery of Meta's past. I confess that I don't like a hair of his head. Why did he come into the game and give it a turn of this sort? Orinoco, I am going to 'Frisco."

"To find the runaways of Blister City?"

"To find and to separate!" cried Saturn. "If Blister wants me for the death of the boss they have planted, tell them that Saturn pledges his honor to come back when he has fulfilled his last oath. The game is ahead of me. It is yonder toward the distant lamps of the city by the sea."

Saturn's leveled arm pointed westward, and his tall figure straightened in the silence that followed his last word.

Orinoco seemed to draw back and look at the arm.

"You shall not go alone!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"There is more ahead than the hand of the young man. He cannot restore Meta to her own."

"He shall not! That is for me to do."
 "For Saturn and Orinoco!" came the response in thunder tones, and at the grave of Trinidad Tom the two men clasped hands and looked into each other's eyes.

"You won't refuse me the partnership, Saturn?" continued Orinoco. "Something tells me that on the trail you have found I shall find the death angel who came to Blister not long ago, and struck Monte over the prize he found in Noland's clothes."

"What! haven't you forgotten that?"

"Forgotten?" echoed Orinoco. "A man who had a friend like Monte was cannot forge! I shall find the slayer on this trail—perhaps in the gilded parlors of Talbot the nabob."

"Oho! I understand," cried Saturn. "One trail, but a double quest."

"You may call it so."

"Then, off we are, Orinoco. I think you are right. You will find your quarry under the roof of the Frisco Croesus unless Sunshine Sam or Luckless Luke has found him and his secret before this."

"Where is the sleuth?"

"I don't know," answered Saturn, shaking his head.

CHAPTER XXXV. AHEAD OF THE HOUNDS.

THERE were more than two-score of bronzed men who waited at Old Resolute's bar for Orinoco, the pard who had lingered on the spot where Captain Trinidad had just been buried.

Orinoco was looked upon as the spirit to direct the hunt for vengeance, but the men waited in vain, for he did not come.

Bowler Burt did not see fit to narrate how he had failed to destroy Saturn the outlawed when he demolished the Glazed Dungeon at the expense of his red whiskers, and the men who investigated the cause of the shock came to the conclusion that Saturn had perished in his underground cell.

Orinoco had turned his face toward Frisco with Saturn, and while the assembled pards cursed him with true mountain emphasis, he was following westward the branded tough of Blister City.

Saturn told the truth when he said he did not know what had become of Sunshine Sam.

He had not been permitted to watch the sleuth as he would like to have done, therefore, it was impossible for him to know aught of the adventures which had befallen the Chip of the Old Block since their last encounter in the Sierra camp.

We know that Sam had followed Red Cloud the Klamath, and his comrade, Long Thunder, to the mine where the detective shut himself up in a trap, which, when we left him, threatened to be his tomb.

Sunshine Sam had been in too many traps during his career even when he found himself without a match and with the skeleton of Hotspur Houk, the mine's last victim, lying at his feet.

He went boldly to work after a breathing spell, and once more he was hunting for a way out of the underground maze.

There was too much at stake, Sam thought, to think of giving up the trail which had lured him from New York to the heart of the Sierras.

His journey from the skeleton appeared to take him deeper and deeper into the unknown mine. The labyrinth became more and more perplexing.

At last the buried sleuth halted.

"There's got to be a change soon," he exclaimed, his voice sounding strange in the darkness that hemmed him in. "I cannot say that I am in the lost bonanza which has excited Talbot, and to find which he sent Red Cloud and the Silent Six into these mountains. I have yet found no great evidences of great wealth. Now and then I have picked up stones whose peculiar weight seems to tell me that they contain gold; but that is all. Noland's lettering on the rock tells that he believed this to be a mine of wonderful richness. It was so to the unfortunate wretch, Hotspur Houk, till he saw in it only a death trap."

Thoughts of Red Cloud pushing on toward Frisco nerved the sleuth to renewed exertions.

He plunged into the corridors again.

"I am back to Hotspur Houk!" he suddenly exclaimed as his foot struck and scattered some objects which he knew to be human bones. "Am I to come back here time after time? Is Hotspur Houk to be the magnet destined to draw Sunshine Sam to doom? I guess not! Now for the big effort!"

Ten minutes later the city sleuth sent up a shout of joy for he believed he had rediscovered the chamber into which he had lowered himself from the passage down which he had crept from the entrance to the mine.

A close examination of the walls as he could make it in the dark convinced him that he was right.

The edge of the wall was ten feet above his head, and his arms were not long enough to let him reach the coveted prize.

Hours had passed since his self-incarceration, and the detective, with burning eagerness, desired to bring the unpleasant adventure to a close.

He attacked the wall of the cavern with his knife until he discovered that it was too hard for the blade.

With an expression of rage he put up the knife and rested.

"The next time I drop down like a rat into a barrel, the world will know it!" broke forth the sleuth.

He felt his way to the exit, as an idea which had not struck him before came to his rescue.

He had stumbled over a lot of broken stone somewhere in the darkness.

If he could but find them, he might build a way to freedom as Captain Merle had done, though Sam knew it not, under similar circumstances.

He found the pile—ragged rocks of all sizes, like fragments produced by an explosion under ground.

One by one he carried them back to the spot he had chosen for the point of escape.

He made a heap there, and after hard work, had the satisfaction of clutching the top of the wall.

There was no watcher there to tear his hands loose and to hurl him back as Red Cloud had done for Merle Monterey.

Sunshine Sam scrambled up and started down the passage with exulting heart.

He found Nathan Noland's proclamation with his hands, but did not stop to decipher it in the gloom.

On, on he went, and when he crawled out of the opening ahead into the trail he had left some time before, he could hardly resist the impulse to send his hat toward the sky.

The detective was at large once more.

Sam's first action was to take from his pocket a lot of rough bits of wall and stone which he had picked up during his wandering in the mine.

A look at them brought a shout to his lips.

"I have found the secret! The lost bonanza is no myth. These nuggets are almost solid gold! But what would they have been worth if I had not found my way out of the death-trap that caught Hotspur Houk of Monteverde?"

Sam could not tell how long he had been in the mine of the Sierras.

His time had been taken up in a bewildering tramp through the subterranean labyrinth which by the merest chance had not cost him his life.

Blister City was not far away, but the sleuth thought not of going back to it.

He was willing to let Saturn and Trinidad Tom play their game out between them.

To Sam it was nothing more than a struggle for the mastery of the gold-camp, and he had not crossed the continent to take a hand in a play of that sort.

He thought of Meta, but dismissed her with a smile as he exclaimed:

"The boy will take care of her; I am sure of that. I left him in the mine, where I cut his bonds to take his choice—to stay and fight the toughs of Blister, or quit the country. He will not do the former, for Claude Dumont is a man of too much sense for that, and when he does the latter he will not go alone. I guess black eyes catch a fellow the world over—no difference where he is, or under what circumstances."

For Sam of New York, the trail he wanted to follow stretched ahead through the wild heart of No-Gold Land to the city of the nabobs by the sea.

He did not hesitate, after he had marked well the location of the mine from which he had escaped.

The thought that goaded him forward was that which told him that Red Cloud was on the trail to Frisco.

He had sworn that the Indian should never claim the reward promised by Talbot of Frisco, and also that the man who wanted to increase his already immense wealth by means disgraceful should not touch a dollar of the Sierra's treasure.

It was now a race for the coast, with the wily Indian well in the lead, but with the most indefatigable of sleuths on the same trail.

Of course the chances of fortune were with the red; but the trail was long, and fate might play into the hands of Captain Coldgrip's pupil.

Sunshine Sam did not think often of Captain Merle.

He had not forgotten how he had encountered him near the Last Chance Mine, while the earth still trembled with the explosion which Bowler Burt had brought about for the destruction of Saturn, the outlawed.

Sam believed that Merle had gone back to Blister City, where he was likely to take prominent sides in the events there. He did not dream that while he was pushing toward Frisco, the captain of the Silent Six was nearer the goal than he.

It was growing dusk over the city and far out over the dancing waves when a handsome man, with long hair and intensely black eyes, dismounted from a jaded horse on one of the poorest-lighted streets, and walked up the steps that fronted a plain house in a quiet quarter.

The door was pulled open before he could knock, and the man greeted a tall youth, whose look was a wild stare of mingled joy and astonishment.

"Great heavens! I had almost given you up!" cried the young man. "I look upon you as one back from the dead."

"That's where I'm from, Carl," was the laughing reply. "I'm one of six."

"My God, no!"

"It is true. But I'm not here to talk of them. Of course I would come to you first. You promised to keep posted when I went away."

"There have not been events enough to keep me very busy, Captain Merle."

"I presume not. How is my friend, the colonel?"

"He is still on deck."

"And anxious to hear from his bonanza trailers?"

"Yes; if he has not given you up."

"What! do you think he has done this, Carl?"

Merle Monterey looked eagerly at the youth he addressed.

"I'm—afraid—they've—all—given—you—up," he said, slowly.

"Medora, too?"

The young man flushed.

"Medora, too," he answered, rather emphatically. "Captain Merle, the girl has ferreted out the compact."

The long-haired sport flew at Carl with the fury of a beast, and clutched his wrist.

"Do you tell me this?" cried he. "How did the secret get out? The whole thing seems impossible. But what does she say?"

"She is willing to submit to it."

Captain Merle recoiled with a curse and a cry.

"It is false! Great God! a woman like Medora would never consent to become the wife of a scarlet viper like the one I have followed day and night for four months. She has lost her head if she thinks of such a thing!"

The young man before Merle seemed transformed into a statue of stone.

"Was that the compact?" parted his lips.

"It was."

"It is infamous enough to have been made in Tartarus! Medora laughed when she spoke of the compact between Talbot and Red Cloud, but she did not drop into particulars, and I never thought of a piece of devilry like this."

"You know it now. I have been on the trail for days and nights. I tried to find a short trail, but it has seemed an endless one. When were you up at the mansion?"

"Last night."

"No news then of Red Cloud?"

"None."

Captain Merle took a breath of relief.

"I may be ahead of the hounds!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE APOLLO'S MISTAKE.

A FLASH of eagerness twinkled in Merle Monterey's eyes when he gave utterance to the ejaculation.

Ahead of the hounds!

If he had beaten Red Cloud and Sunshine Sam to Frisco he had something to feel proud of.

"Who are the hounds?" asked the young man Carl. "I thought the Indian was the only person besides the six who went out on the trail of the mine."

"You forget the sleuth-hound calling himself Sunshine Sam."

The young man shook his head.

"I do not know him," he replied.

"I owe him one!" cried Merle sending the words through his teeth as it were. "He came between me and victory, in No-Gold Land, when I had the Indian and his red pard in sight. But for Sunshine Sam, I would not be here asking you if the red-skin had come back. So, Carl, my boy, you were up at the mansion last night?"

"I was here."

"And saw Talbot?"

"Yes."

"And talked with Medora?"

"I saw Medora, that was all."

"Is she as pretty as ever, Carl?"

The youth flushed again, but at the same time he looked half-fiercely at Captain Merle through his long lashes.

"What makes the boy start and flush whenever I mention the girl?" thought the long-haired sport. "It can't be that Red Cloud's promised bride has pulled him into the net. I didn't intend that it should happen thus. By Jupiter! maybe I've overreached myself. But I will see; I will find out."

Merle Monterey went out and put up the speed that carried him faithfully over the mountains—back from the perils of No-Gold Land to the city of the American nabobs.

It was a rich night, with a vault of glittering stars, and a magnificent breeze curling in from the ocean.

Captain Merle felt the wind in his face, and his heart took new pulsations from the thought that he was back in Frisco and "ahead of the hounds."

He set out at once for Mark Talbot's mansion.

Although he was well acquainted in Frisco, no one seemed to recognize him, or if they did, there were no greetings as he passed along the streets.

To come back alive after what he had passed through was a piece of good fortune. His sole regret was that he had not carried out Talbot's commands as they had been brought to him by Little Onyx.

Merle had not discovered Red Cloud's secret; he had failed to leave the Indian dead in the depths of the Sierra Nevada.

The handsome sport passed eagerly through the grove of shrubbery that rose in front of Talbot's house, and looked up to see a light in the windows of the private room where the gold map had adorned the walls for years.

Colonel Talbot was at home!

Just beneath the windows ran a veranda covered with a network of creepers whose leaves formed a carpet, as he had noticed many a time, on the roof.

Merle had stopped to look up at the house.

All at once a figure that resembled a huge ape swung itself over the top of the veranda, and came agilely down, hand over hand, through leaves and vines.

The spectacle startled Captain Merle, who had approached the house without noise, and the strange sight appeared to transform him into a statue.

It was so novel, so unexpected; and he involuntarily asked himself!

"Have I come back to Frisco to see an ape descend from Mark Talbot's windows?"

The object continued to come down the vines until it jumped a slight distance and landed on its feet.

Then Merle Monterey saw that it was human, and it took no close scrutiny to tell him that it was an Indian!

In a flash vanished the delusive hope that he had beaten the hounds.

Of course to Merle there could be but one Indian where this one stood, and that person Red Cloud, the Klamath.

The sport of Frisco sent his hand almost mechanically toward the hidden belt that encircled his body but immediately he drew it off and leaned toward the motionless red-skin, half way across the shadow of the pine that screened him.

The Indian looked proudly up at the windows he had just left; he seemed to rejoice over his feat, whatever it had been.

When he moved off he turned partly on Captain Merle, giving the long-haired Apollo the chance he wanted.

A greyhound could not have been quicker than the gold-sport was.

With something of a pantherish spring and a cry which he could not suppress, Merle landed squarely against the Indian, and at the same time he threw an arm over his head, forcing it back at a risk of breaking a dark-red neck.

"I'm the man you have to beat before you win the prize!" hissed Merle, as the Indian, squirming even in his vise-like grip, turned half-way round and looked him in the face. "You may eucher Merle Monterey in the mountains, but this is Frisco!"

At the same time he pushed his prisoner back against the vines, and then, spurred forward by the touch of the hands that closed on his arms, he drew a knife, and struck once downward between naked neck and shoulder.

No power could avert the blow. It was as swift as a lightning bolt and in its results almost as terrible.

The red-skin's grip relaxed almost before the quick hand of Captain Merle could withdraw the blade, and the next moment a figure reeled away and sunk down at a clump of roses!

"Dead! and the secret lost, but by heavens! I have won Medora!" cried the man, who surveyed his work a minute from where he had struck, then

he bridged the distance with a step and bent over the red.

Never had a single stroke of a seven-inch bowie been truer. The Indian was already dead—dead with his hand half-closed about the hilt of an ugly-looking knife as Captain Merle had ever seen.

The victor drew the weapon from the Indian's belt and went toward the house.

He did not stand on ceremony, but opened the door which did not resist, and entered.

Nobody had heard the struggle in the garden.

This was not strange for it had been almost noiseless.

Monterey walked on tiptoe up the steps that led from the hall to the rooms above, and with an impatience and triumph which he made no effort to conceal, boldly opened a certain door.

He was greeted with a cry before he was fairly across the threshold.

"Thank Heaven! I had almost given you up!" was the exclamation, and Mark Talbot sprang from his chair, and clutching Merle's hand, dragged him forward.

"You got my letter? Your presence here alone tells me that I did not send Little Onyx forth on a fool's errand. By Jove! you've given me a new lease of life, Captain Merle. You have found the bonanza—snatched the secret from Red Cloud, and relieved me of a bad part of my compact. Wet your throat first!"

The 'Frisco sport found it impossible to wedge a single word in between Talbot's sentences. The swiftness of the nabob's tongue bewildered him, and he did not begin to recover till he saw Talbot filling a goblet with the choice wine he poured only on special occasions.

"Where did you leave the red ferret of the Klamaths?" asked Talbot, suddenly.

"He's nearer than you think," was the reply.

"What! didn't you get to do the job in the mountains?"

"No. The Indian is down yonder among your roses."

The California millionaire bounded from his chair.

"My God! did he slip through your fingers and bring his report this near home?" was his exclamation.

"He did."

"It was lucky that you caught him even here. If he had opened my door instead of yourself, Captain Merle, I would have fainted in my chair. Before I ask you another question let us go down and look at the sleuth of the Klamaths—the serpent you have beaten with fortune against you."

Merle Monterey raised no objection to this.

He was even ready to go down and look again at the foe he had vanquished at the goal of his ambition.

Talbot and his lieutenant descended the stair together and passed out into the yard.

The body of the Indian lay where Merle had left it, and Talbot retreated a step on discovering the corpse.

"Is this Red Cloud?" he asked, throwing the California Apollo a quick glance. "I don't see the hat he used to perforate with his bowie for amusement. Was he hatless when he came down the vines?"

"I remember now that he was."

Without replying, Mark Talbot stooped over the dead and looked for a second, then he bounded up and confronted Merle.

"As I live! you've trailed the wrong man!"

How awfully the words sounded.

"The—wrong—man?" echoed the six-foot individual, who recoiled as if he had been pushed back, but a second hardly elapsed before he went forward and dropped on his knee above the motionless victim of his knife.

The stars did not give him light enough, so he snapped a match and held it close to the face he wanted to inspect.

One look was all he wanted.

"The wrong dog, sure enough!" he cried, looking up at the man quietly watching him. "I wonder what became of the master? This is Long Thunder when I thought him to be Red Cloud."

Captain Merle stood on his feet again, and did not speak till the voice of the 'Frisco nabob called him back to life as it were.

"The other is near. We have to watch for Red Cloud. You have discovered the secret of the lost mine; but you have failed to finish the right red-skin. That is the way the case stands."

"Unfortunately it stands in another light, colonel. I have not the secret as yet."

Talbot started toward Merle with a look that threw him on guard.

"What have you been doing all this time?" he cried. "Where are the sworn men I sent with you to the Sierras—six desperadoes to outwit one Indian? You have failed! Not only that, but you follow the wrong red home and kill him in my door. Is this the way Merle Monterey keeps his oaths?"

"Wait!" answered the sport. "If you will go back to your affairs I will yet deliver the report you want!"

"Oh, I see! You will wait for the Indian who eluded you in the mountains?"

"I will find him, too! He started for 'Frisco with the Greaser lying dead at your feet. I saw the start, and but for the interference of Sunshine Sam I would have reported long ago."

A smile, seen in the starlight by the sport, curled the nabob's lips.

"How much time do you want?" he asked.

"Not much. I am sure that Red Cloud is near. He must have come to 'Frisco with his pard."

"Take your time. I still trust you, Merle Monterey. Heaven knows I would sooner pay the reward to you than to the red wolf of the Klamaths."

The Californian's eyes were seen to glitter, and he said to himself with emphasis:

"The prize is not yet lost!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE INDIAN'S KNIFE.

A DAY elapsed, then two, then a week.

Red Cloud, the Klamath, did not come.

Mark Talbot and Captain Merle had a secret which they zealously guarded, and 'Frisco did not hear of the Indian who had dropped dead in the nabob's garden.

"I wish," remarked Talbot to the long-haired sport one night while they sat over their wine in the

private room in the mansion, waiting for Red Cloud to claim his reward. "I wish you would drop in some time on a queer old fellow on S—street."

"Who is he, colonel, and what attraction has he for you?"

"His name is Nathan Noland, though his last name is known to but few. He is universally called Nathan."

Captain Merle appeared to give a slight start.

"What use can I make of him?" he asked.

"I will tell you. Nathan possesses a secret I'd like to have."

"The bonanza secret, colonel?"

"Nothing more nor less, as I verily believe. About the time you went off to the mountains with my commission in your pocket, Nathan sent a man to the Sierras ostensibly to look for a child he claims to have lost there years ago, when he was a gold-hunter in what must have been No-Gold Land. I have seen Nathan, but he will tell me nothing."

"How then can I get at him?"

"Listen: A short time ago he was visited by some one who left him for dead on the couch which he is compelled to keep most of the time, owing to an infirmity. I am told that he was found nearly dead the next day, and that his memory as to the identity of his assailant is blank. It is not strange with Nathan, however, for a blow on the head long ago robbed him of the recollection of important events. So he says, mind you. Do you know him?"

"I think I have heard of him," replied Merle.

"Perhaps. He is not wholly unknown in 'Frisco. I want you to see him and pretend that you have found the traces of a strange young girl in the Sierras. His story of 'lost Claudia' as he calls her is well known; it has crept into the papers, and the reporters have made quite a romance out of it. Now, Nathan holds the secret I want—the one Red Cloud may have discovered. Go to him and play any sly hand you think will win. I have tried him; but without success."

"I will give him a tilt. On S—street you say, colonel?"

"Number 598—a small house with a big tree for a sentinel."

"I'll try him now." Merle glanced at his watch. "The Indian won't come to-night."

"I don't think he intends to come," laughed Talbot. "I haven't thought so since I became convinced that the knife you took from the dead spy was the one carried by Red Cloud when he went away."

Merle Monterey departed on his mission.

"I desire to see Nathan myself," he murmured. "I fancy I could guess who left him for dead some time ago. Colonel Talbot, you should have kept that sparkle out of your eyes while you talked about the choking. You've been a little too eager to get at Nathan's secret; you could not wait till your emissaries came back. By Jove! I begin to think you are right about the Indian. Long Thunder wanted all; he saw a chance for a fortune, and he undoubtedly left Red Cloud somewhere on the trail between here and Blister City."

Captain Monterey knew the city well enough to go straight to Nathan's humble abode with the number in his possession.

He had left Talbot alone in the private room, and the millionaire had promised to remain there till he reported.

Talbot had recovered much of his self-possession during the last few days.

A thousand times almost he had examined the knife which Merle had taken from his enemy in the garden.

He could not be mistaken. It was the same weapon he had seen in Red Cloud's possession; he had seen the Klamath perform with it and the hat, as we have witnessed several times in the course of our story.

The nabob naturally thought of the knife while he waited for the man he had sent on a subtle mission to the crippled prospector.

It was right to his hand in a drawer of the table at which he sat, and to think of it was to hold it again in his hands.

"I would like to know the history of this knife; it surely has one," said Talbot over the weapon which he handled with curiosity. "Some-how-or-other the blade has become loose in the hilt since it fell into my possession. It was immovable when Merle took it from the Indian. I have handled it a great deal, but not roughly enough to loosen the steel."

He tried to tighten the shining blade in the handle which was yellow ivory with silver ornamentation, and in his desire to succeed he took up a paper-weight and dealt it a smart blow.

The next instant the blade dropped from the socket and fell to the floor, where its needle-like point caused it to stick quivering between Talbot's feet.

The 'Frisco money-king uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Why, the handle is hollow!" he exclaimed the next moment, and his eyes seemed to snap with excitement. "By Jove! I believe the Indian's knife is the custodian of a secret. There is some paper in the hilt!"

Colonel Talbot's breath came and went in short gasps. He inserted a pen into the bowie-handle and began to extract a bit of paper which he found there.

It was slow work, but Talbot kept it up till there dropped into his lap a folded paper as dirty as well-worn buckskin.

He threw the hilt on the table to catch up the paper he had extracted.

"Maybe I am the lucky trailer," burst from his throat. "One can stay at home sometimes and see stranger sights than those who go on long journeys. What if I have discovered the lost treasure of the Sierras?"

He leaned toward the light and unfolded the paper.

The first thing that caught his eyes was something like a rough chart on the surface of the paper.

Mark Talbot saw lines, crosses and dots.

A gold chart sure enough. If not, what would it be doing in the hilt of the Indian's knife?

"This can be studied out," exclaimed Talbot.

"Merle has a good head on him for such things. I will put him to work when he comes back. My wealth to a shanty that I have the secret of the lost mine. Thank fortune! the Indian killed by Captain Monterey brought the knife to my door. There goes the bell!" and Talbot hid the paper as the tones

of the bell on the door below came muscally to his ears. "Is that Merle back already?" he suddenly went on. "I told him not to ring but to come right up."

The nabob left the room and went into the hall where he leaned over the banister and listened.

He saw a female figure flit to the glass at one side of the door and look out.

"Who is it, Medora?" the nabob called out.

"A strange man," came up from below.

"White or red, child?"

"White."

"No harm in white men," thought Talbot. "Send him up, Medora," and then he went back to the private room.

In a little while he heard footsteps in the hallway, and the next moment he was looking into a well-cut face, above the center line of which were two black eyes full of expression.

"Colonel Talbot, I take it?" said the visitor in tones a little coarse but not unpleasant.

"That is my name."

"I am Sunshine Sam."

Talbot was not prepared for a revelation of this sort, and the start he gave brought a bevy of smiles to his visitor's lips.

"I don't think we have ever met confidentially, colonel," continued the detective. "I've had the honor of attending a reception in your house. I was Barnett Brooks then and that was about four months ago."

"I don't recollect you, sir."

"Perhaps not. But let me break the ice, colonel. I am going back to New York to-morrow. I crossed the continent on what many called a wild goose-chase, but," with a twinkle, "it hasn't proved such by a long shot. I have called to say, colonel, that your red trailer will not report. The last I saw of him he was falling through some moonlight and an Indian very much like him was watching his descent with the devil in his eye."

Talbot gave vent to a surprised exclamation and leaned toward Sunshine Sam.

"Did you really see this?" he cried.

"I saw nothing else. The contest between the two Indians prevented me from playing a hand against Red Cloud. The two Klamaths were not destined to be friends, and the trail to 'Frisco was too narrow for both. You might look out a little for the one who got the better of your gold-trailer. I've dropped in to say this—to put you on your guard before I go away. I guess Medora is safe, now."

"Medora?" ejaculated Talbot.

"Yes. You won't have to pay the red-skin his reward. He was coming back to you with the bonanza secret, but Sunshine Sam was close at his heels when the tragedy of the canyon occurred."

Talbot's look had become a stare.

"What did you go out to the Sierras for?" he suddenly asked.

"The lost mine secret, colonel."

"The—Old Harry you did!"

"It lured me from New York, and just when Captain Coldgrip, my old master, had a deep case for me."

"Who gave you a clew in Gotham?"

"A man who died in the hospital."

"What was his name?"

"Noland."

"In fortune's name how many Noland's were there?" cried Talbot.

"Three," answered Sam with a smile, and before the nabob could speak he continued. "There was David who died in New York, Noel whom the pards of Blister City hung, and Nathan the cripple of 'Frisco. I guess Nathan is the happiest man in California to-night."

"Why?"

"He has found his lost Claudia the little girl for whom he has been looking these many years."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Talbot, but he suddenly changed his tone. "Are you going to take back to New York the secret of the Sierra Ophir?"

"Why not, Mark Talbot? You don't think I'd sell it to you, eh?"

"And I wouldn't buy!" cried the nabob, a flash of triumph lighting his eyes to their very depths.

"Why, I wouldn't give you a dollar for what you know to-night."

"How's that, colonel? A few weeks ago you were willing to make Medora an Indian's bride for the mystery of the gold hills."

"So I was, but I've got it now without parting with a hand or with a dollar. Red Cloud sent me the secret he was not permitted to bring himself. Ha! ha! Sunshine Sam, the ferret of New York has lost in California!"

"Lost?" echoed the chip of the old block. "Why, bless you, colonel, Sunshine Sam never loses. He got better schooling than that under Captain Claude, the king of American sleuths. You can't laugh me into the belief that you have sat here and picked up the secret of the Sierras. No, no, Colonel Talbot, it won't do."

"By heavens! I'll prove it!" roared the nabob coloring, and with the answer he jerked from his bosom a piece of paper. "It is here—the diagram, the trail—the very prize itself! It came to me in the red-skin's bowie—hidden in the handle. The hilt is in the drawer. No!—it is not—there!"

Talbot had jerked open the drawer at his right, and his eyes were looking like a wild man's into the empty corner.

"Well, this paper came in the knife," he went on, turning to Sam. "The knife itself—"

"Red Cloud holds the knife, white liar of 'Frisco!"

Both men heard the startling words which came from a corner of the room where a curtain hid the nabob's sideboard.

Talbot with staring eyes seemed glued to his chair, but Sunshine Sam leaped straight at the figure of Red Cloud the Klamath.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FINISH.

SATURN must have helped his own on the mountain trail!" ran through the detective's mind as he cleared the space between him and the athletic red-skin who threw up his hand armed with the recently dismembered knife.

A collision was unavoidable, and it came before Talbot could catch his breath.

The Nabob of 'Frisco saw the hand of the New

York sleuth clutch the arm that came down with almost resistless force, and in a twinkling Sam was holding Red Cloud across the table among the writing materials and books that littered it.

The Indian's head was forced over one side, and the grip of his foe was at his throat.

The Klamath's eyes seemed to start from his head.

Sam looked up at the speechless millionaire with a dash of triumph in his expressive orbs, while Red Cloud writhed like a boa in the power of his hands.

The attack had not extended beyond the space of a breath.

"What do you think of your gold spy now, colonel?" smiled Sam. "You have discovered that the knife has found its way back to its owner."

Talbot cast a glance at the weapon which had dropped from Red Cloud's hands, and was sticking in the floor near the table.

"What are you going to do with him?" he asked, approaching Sam, but avoiding the mad eyes of the Indian.

"Let him go, of course," was the reply. "I presume you want to employ him again. He is no doubt ready to deliver his report and take the prize."

"I don't want his report," retorted Talbot, thinking of the paper he had found in the hilt of the dagger. "But hold him a while longer, Sunshine Sam."

The sleuth grinned.

"I'm minded to let him up," he said. "Since he is not to have Medora for his report, I don't care what becomes of him."

During this time Red Cloud had spoken emphatically with his eyes, for the hand of the sleepless detective had closed like a vise on his throat.

Sam now let up a little, and the Indian caught second breath.

"What does the white man say about not keeping the compact with Red Cloud?" he demanded of Talbot.

"I don't keep it, because I hold the secret already. It is no secret that you bring me, Red Cloud."

"Who told the gold king?"

"No one. I found it out."

A scornful smile appeared at the Klamath's mouth, and he looked at Sam.

"Will the white hawk let Red Cloud up?" he asked.

"For God's sake, do nothing of the kind!" cried Talbot. "Not for a minute, at least," he added.

The words were followed by a dash toward a polished sideboard at one side of the room, and Sam saw the nabob snatch down a silver-mounted revolver which he cocked as he leveled it at the Indian's head.

"Now let him up!" said Talbot through his teeth.

The next second Sam stepped back and the red trapper sprung to his feet like a suddenly-released Jack-in-the-box.

He found himself covered by the weapon and Mark Talbot's finger at the trigger.

"Away!" cried the 'Frisco Croesus over the pistol. "Walk out of this house at once and never again cross the path of Talbot of 'Frisco. He has beaten you to the secret. The next time you send your knife ahead of you, you should be careful what the handle contains. Ha, ha!"

The Indian looked mystified.

"What means the white liar of the gold-bugs?" he exclaimed.

"Never mind! You have lost the prize, Red Cloud, and Talbot has won. I neither explain nor parley. You deserve to have your brains scattered over the gold chart behind you for falling on the men I sent with you to the Sierras, and if Captain Merle, the sole survivor, were here, I'd let him play avenger. Threaten me all you please with your eyes; but, by the eternal heavens! if you use your tongue I'll drop you dead in your tracks!"

For several moments the Indian looked daggers at the man who held his life at the touch of a trigger then, all at once, with a flash of his eyes that would have done justice to the threat of an eagle, he whirled and vanished!

So sudden was his going that both Talbot and Sunshine Sam started, and the latter smiled when he heard the gold-wolf of the Klamaths on the stair.

"He went off like a rocket, eh, colonel?"

"Didn't he, though?" laughed Talbot. "He couldn't realize that I caught the the bonanza secret in advance of him."

"Are you sure you have it?"

"I held it up to you just before the Indian sprung from behind the curtain. He must have entered by the window while I was in the hall exchanging words with Medora. The secret belongs to Talbot at last! I am sorry for you, sir, but I'll pay you well for to-night's work."

"No, thanks," and Sam waved his hand toward Talbot. "The visit of Red Cloud and your boast will not change my mind. I go back to Captain Claude to-morrow."

"Then," said Talbot, biting his lip, "then you don't think I have the secret?"

"Try it and see, colonel."

The following minute Talbot was alone once more, but not for long.

Five minutes later he was confronted by Merle Monterey.

"I found Nathan," said the long-haired sport. "He's the happiest man in 'Frisco to-night."

"Then it is true?"

"What is true?"

"That he has found the child he lost long ago in the Sierras?"

"Yes, Meta, of Blister City, turns out to be Claudia Noland; and Claude Dumont, the old fellow's spy and the chap who ran her off from Trinidad Tom and his league, brought her back to her father."

"But, what identified the girl?" questioned Talbot.

"The story Saturn told to the little party."

"Who is Saturn?"

"He's the man who found Meta, or Claudia, in No-Gold Land soon after the Indian massacre, and who ever since has been her guardian. Saturn and a pard named Orinoco followed the young couple up with the intention of separating them; but the girl broke up their schemes, and all's serene at Nathan's now."

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"Let it be so. Saturn and pard can go back to camp."

"They will when they have settled with Red Cloud for his murder of Moccasin Monte, the big-hearted pard of No-Gold Land."

"Then I hope they'll find the Indian soon. I have the secret, and Medora is saved."

Captain Merle went eagerly toward Talbot, who regarded him with looks of victory.

"Where did you get the secret, I'd like to know?" he demanded, incredulously.

"In this house. The knife you took from the dead Indian spoke in a marvelous tongue. Look here, Captain Merle!"

At the same time Talbot drew forth the chart found in the dagger-hilt, and handed it proudly to his companion.

Merle Monterey opened the paper, and then spread it out in the light.

"Hello! this is Bill Poole's old map!" he exclaimed.

Talbot bent forward with a cry of wonder on his tongue.

"Who was Bill Poole?" he asked.

"The crazy man of Pine Gulch Camp. He's been dead these fifteen years. His hobby was gold charts. He used to make 'em and peddle 'em wherever he could hear of mining-camps. Sometimes he'd hide 'em in the handles of knives or in rifle-stocks—in fact, anywhere to make the scheme look mysterious and—"

Merle stopped suddenly and stared at Talbot, the nabob.

The Californian was colorless, and had fallen back in his chair, gasping for breath.

"My God! isn't that diagram worth anything?" he cried. "Are you sure, Captain Merle, that it is one of Poole's frauds?"

"It is nothing else. I know 'em on sight, for I've seen a hundred in my time. The Indian probably ran across one of Poole's knives somewhere without knowing what it contained."

"Then the jig is up, and Sunshine Sam and Red Cloud have walked off with the Ophir of No-Gold Land."

"The red can't get away. Saturn and Orinoco will give him no rest."

"But who will wrest the secret from the New York ferret?"

"I'm afraid he will hold the game," replied Merle.

Captain Merle's prophecy was the correct one—Sunshine Sam held the game.

The night after the events just witnessed, two men closed in on a solitary Indian in the suburbs of 'Frisco, and a knife which had been consecrated to vengeance in the heart of the Sierras avenged the cruel death of Monte, the big-hearted.

"Now we can go back to the Eternal League, Orinoco," said one of the avengers. "I will tell them how I happened to get out of the Glazed Dungeon just before Bowlder Burt blew it up at Trinidad's orders. After that if they want to execute sentence on the outlaw of Blister City, they won't be interfered with."

Mark Talbot gave Medora the beautiful to Captain Merle and sent him back to the Sierras; but there came from east of the mountains a lot of resolute men guided by Sunshine Sam, and the long-haired sport was forced to behold them stake off a claim which covered the lost Ophir of No-Gold Land.

It turned out to be the mine rediscovered by Nathan Noland, and the syndicate gave to Meta, already Claude Dumont's wife, the first year's net earnings which enriched the young couple beyond their wildest dreams of wealth.

Talbot has not recovered from his defeat though some time has passed since it was inflicted. He has torn the gold map from his walls and burned the worthless diagram found in the dagger. Such is his love for gold that I am not sure that he does not wish Red Cloud instead of Captain Merle had won Medora.

Blister City is in ruins, for the events of our romance broke the Eternal League, and its old members know not each others' whereabouts.

As for Sunshine Sam, the tireless Chip of the Old Block who "got there" at last, he is still a sleuth of the trail who wonders how Red Cloud escaped death in the mountains.

This secret died with the Klamath.

THE END.

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